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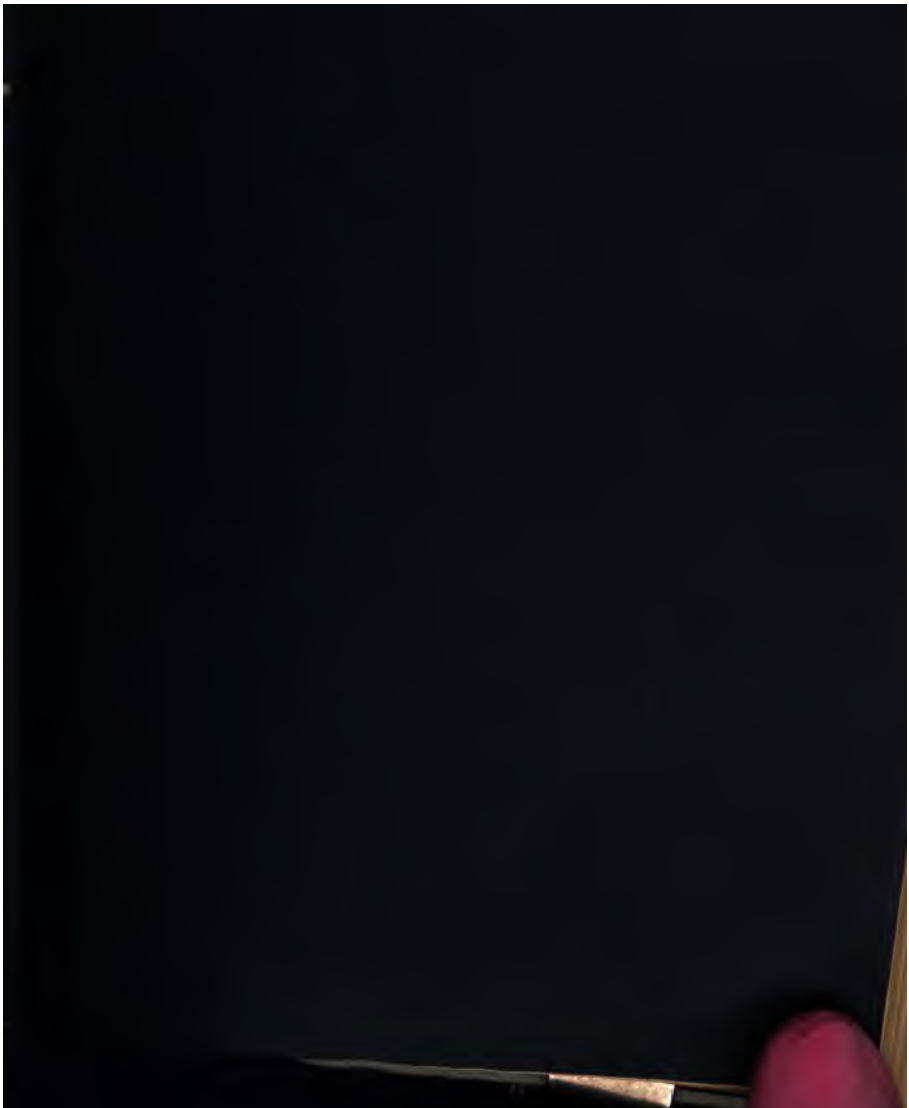
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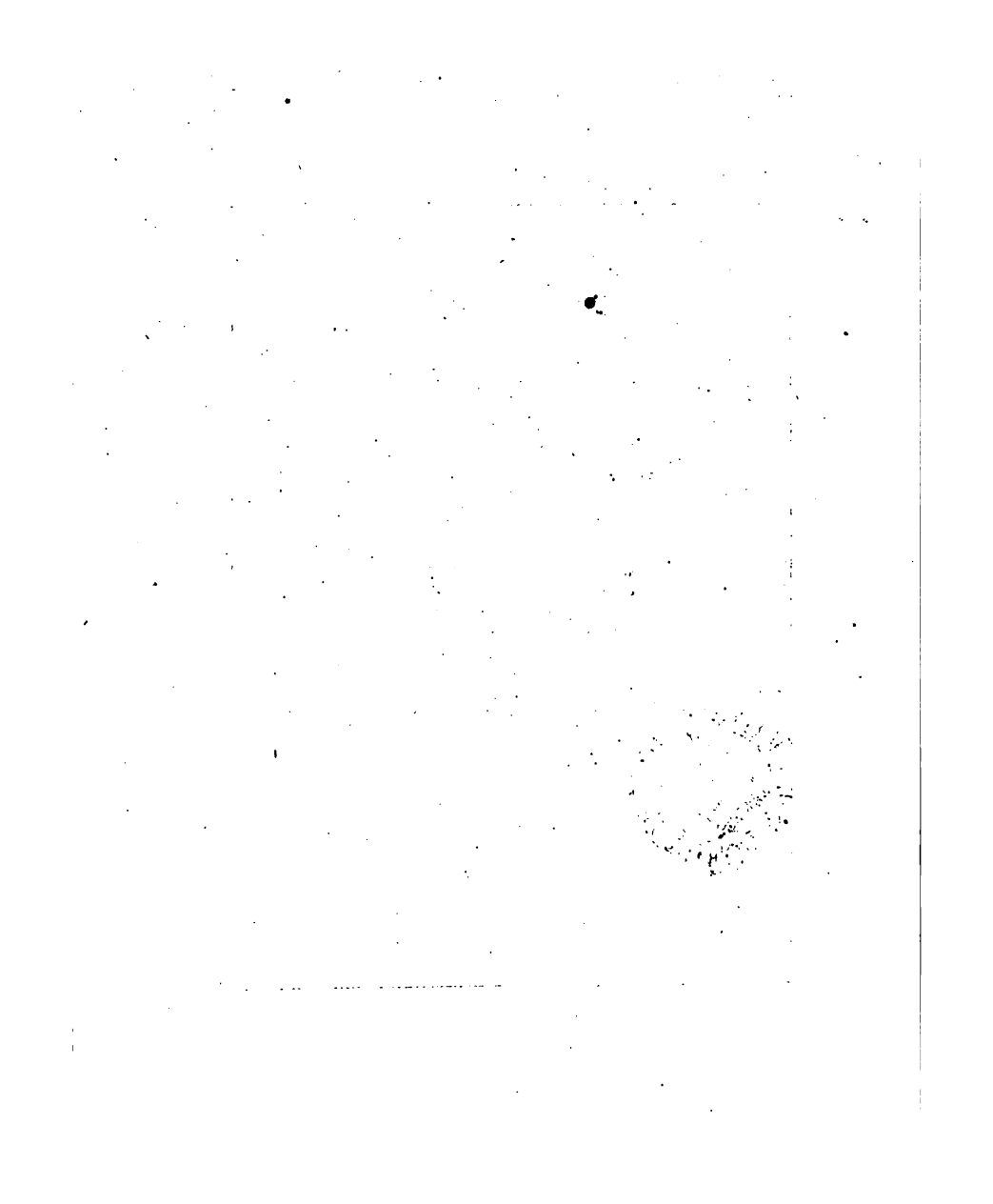
ADVENT SERMONS

HENRY ALFORD, D.D.





Advent Sermons.



ADVENT SERMONS,

CONSISTING OF FOUR ON

The State of the Blessed Dead,

AND FOUR ON

The Coming of the Bridegroom.

Preached in Canterbury Cathedral, 1868 *and* 1869,

BY THE LATE

HENRY ALFORD, D.D.,

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The State of the Blessed Dead.

I.

I HAVE already announced that during this Advent season I would call your attention to the state of the blessed dead. My object in so doing is simply that we may recall to ourselves that which Scripture has revealed respecting them, for our edification, and for our personal comfort. And I would guard that which will be said by one or two preliminary observations.

With Death as an object of terror, with

Death from the mere moralist's point of view, as the termination of human schemes and hopes, we Christians have nothing to do. We are believers in and servants of One who has in these senses abolished Death. Our schemes and hopes are not terminated by Death, but reach onward into a state beyond it.

Again, with that state beyond, except as one of blessedness purchased for us by the Son of God, I am not at present dealing. It is of those that die in the Lord alone that I speak.

And this being so, it is clear that the first point about them demanding our attention is, the very commencement of their state at the moment of death. And this will form our subject to-day.

We shall be guided in its consideration by two texts of Holy Scripture. The one is that where our Lord answers the prayer of the dying thief that He would remember him when He came into His kingdom, Luke xxiii. 43: "VERILY I SAY UNTO THEE, TO-DAY SHALT THOU BE WITH ME IN PARADISE."

And the other is an expression of St. Paul, Phil. i. 23, not improbably taken from those very words recorded in the gospel of that evangelist who was his companion in travel—"TO DEPART AND TO BE WITH CHRIST."

Now in both these one fact is simply declared, viz.: that the departed spirit of the faithful man is WITH CHRIST. It is as if one bright light were lifted for us in the midst of a realm brooded over by impenetrable

mist. For who knows whither the departed spirit has betaken itself when it has left us here? One of the most painful pangs in bereavement by death is the utter and absolute severance without a spark of intelligence of the departed. One hour, life is blest by their presence: the next, it is entirely and for ever gone from us, never to be heard of more. One word, one utterance—how precious in that moment of anguish do we feel that it would be! But we are certain it never will be granted us. None has ever come back who has told the story. Where the spirit wakes and finds itself,—this none has ever declared to us; nor shall we know until our own turn comes. Now in such a state of uncertainty, these texts speak for us a certain truth: The departed spirit is WITH CHRIST.

I shall regard this revelation negatively and positively: as to what it disproves, and as to what it implies.

First, then, it disproves the idea of the spirit passing at death into a state of unconsciousness, from which it is to wake only at the great day of the resurrection. If it is to be with Christ, this cannot be. Christ is in no such state of unconsciousness; He has entered into His rest, and is waiting till all things shall be put under His feet; and it would be a mere delusion to say of the blessed dead that they shall be with Christ, if they were to be virtually annihilated during this time that Christ is waiting for His kingdom. Besides, how then would the Lord's promise to the thief be fulfilled? What consolation would it have been to him, what

answer to his prayer, to be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom, if these words implied that he should be unconsciously sleeping while the Lord was enjoying His triumph! Therefore we may safely say, that the so-called "sleep of the soul," from the act of death till the resurrection, has no foundation in that which is revealed to us.

It is perfectly true that the state of the departed is described to us as "sleeping in Jesus," or rather, for the words are a mis-rendering, a having fallen asleep *through*, or *by means of Jesus*. But our texts are enough to show us that we must not take such an expression for more than it really implies. Sleeping, or falling asleep, was a name current among Jews and Christians, and even

among the best of the heathens, for death, implying its peace and rest, implying also that it should be followed by a waking: but apparently with no intent to convey any idea of unconsciousness. It is a term used with reference to us, as well as to the dead. To us, they are as if they were asleep: removed from us in consciousness, as in presence. The idea also of *taking rest* tended to make this term appropriate. But it must not be used to prove that to which it evidently had no reference.

The spirit, then, of the departed does not pass into unconsciousness. What more do we know of it? It is WITH JESUS.

We have now to consider what this implies. And in doing so we shall have further to make certain that which we think we have

already proved. For first, it clearly implies more than a mere expression of safe-keeping or reserve for a future state of blessedness. "The righteous souls are in the hand of God, and there shall no harm happen to them." This is one thing: but to be with Christ is another. We might again appeal to the spirit of the promise made to the penitent thief in order to show this: we might remind you that in the other text St. Paul is comparing the two states—life in the midst of his children in the faith, and death; and he says, "I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better:" better than being with you, my Philippians.

So that more must be meant than mere safe-keeping in the Redeemer's hands. We

may surely say that nothing less than conscious existence in the presence of Christ can be intended. And if that is intended, then very much more is intended also than those words at first seem to imply. Remember the contrast which this same Apostle elsewhere draws. "We know," he says, "that while we are present in the body, we are absent from the Lord: for we walk by faith, not by appearance: we are willing rather to be absent from the body and present with the Lord." That is, if we follow out the thought, this present state of dwelling in our home, the body, is a state of severance from the Lord; but there is a better state, into which we shall be introduced when this house of the body is pulled down: and from the context in that place we may add, much as we wish to be

clothed upon with our new and glorious body which is from heaven, yet even short of that we have learned to prefer being simply unclothed from the body, because thus we shall be present with the Lord.

So that we may safely assume thus much, my brethren: that the moment a Christian's spirit is released from the body, it does enter into the presence of our Blessed Lord and Saviour, in a way of which it knows nothing here: a way which, compared to all that its previous faith could know of Him, is like presence of friends compared to absence.

Now let us take another remarkable passage of Holy Writ bearing on this same matter. St. John in his First Epistle says, "Beloved, now are we children of God, and it never yet was manifested what we shall be;

but if it should be manifested, we know that we shall be like Him: for we shall see Him as He is:" for this is the more accurate rendering of the words; meaning, if any one could come back, or come down, to us, and tell us what our future state is to be, the information could amount for us now only to this, that we shall be like Him, like Christ; because we shall see Him as He is. And in treating these words at considerable length last year, I pressed it on you that this concluding sentence might bear two meanings; either, we shall be like Him, *because in order to see Him as He is, we* MUST *be like Him;* or, *we shall be like Him, because the sight of Him as He is will change us into His perfect likeness.* For our present purpose, or indeed for any purpose, matters little which of

these meanings we take. At any rate, we have gained this knowledge from St. John's words, that the sight of the Blessed Lord which will be enjoyed by the Christian's spirit on its release from the body, will be accompanied by being also perfectly like Him.

Now, here, my brethren, are the elements of an immediate change, blessed and joyous beyond our conception. Let us spend the rest of our time to-day in dwelling upon it.

And I will not now insist on the deliverance of the spirit from the infirmity, or pain, or decay of the body: because this is not so in all cases. Many a Christian's spirit is set free from a body in perfect vigour and health. Let us take nothing but what is common to all who believe in and serve the

Lord. Now what is our present state with reference to Him whom all Christians love? It is absence. And it is absence aggravated in a way that earthly absence never is. For not only have we never seen Him, which is a case perfectly imaginable in earthly relations, but also, which hardly is, we have no absolute proof of His existence, nor of His mind towards us. Even as far as this, is matter of faith and not of appearance. We have no token, no communication, from Him. I suppose there hardly ever was a Christian yet, living under the present dispensation, entirely dependent upon his faith, who has not at some time or other had the dreadful thought cross his mind—overborne by his faith, but still not wholly extinguished, "What if it should not be true after all?"

And much and successfully as we may contend with these misgivings of unbelief, yet that frame of mind which is represented by them, that wavering, fitful, unsteady faith, ever accompanies us. The distress arising from it is known to every one who has the Christian life in him. Only those never doubt who have never believed: for doubt is of the very essence of belief. But some poor souls are utterly cast down by the fact of its existence—shrink from these half-doubting fits as of themselves deadly sin, and are in continual terror about their soul's safety on this account: others, of stronger minds, regard them truly as inevitable accompaniments of present human weakness, but of course struggle with them, and evermore yearn to be rid of them.

Now if what we have been saying be true, —and I have endeavoured not to go beyond the soberest inferences from the plain language of Scripture,—if so much be true, then the moment of departure from the body puts an end for ever to this imperfect, struggling, fitful state of faith and doubt. The spirit that is but a moment gone, that has left that well-known, familiar tabernacle of the body a sudden wreck of inanimate matter, that spirit is with the Lord. All doubt, all misgiving, is at an end. Every wave raised by this world's storms, this world's currents of interest, this world's rocks and shallows, is suddenly laid, and there is a great calm. Certainty, for doubt; the sight of the Lord, for the conflict of assurance and misgiving; the face of Christ, for the mere faith in

Christ—these have succeeded, because the departed spirit is "with the Lord"—companying with Him.

Before we follow out this farther, let us carefully draw one great distinction. We must not make the too common mistake of confusing this sight of the Lord which immediately follows on the act of death, with that complete state of the glorified Christian man, of which we shall have to speak in a subsequent sermon. Though greater than our thoughts can now conceive, the bliss of which we are speaking to-day is incomplete. The spirit which has been set free from the body is alone, and without a body. This is not the complete state of man. It is a state to us full of mystery—inconceivable in detail, though easily apprehended as a

whole. We must take care, in what we have further to say, that this is fully borne in mind. And, bearing it in mind, let us proceed.

This sight of Christ, this calm of full unbroken assurance of His nearness and presence, what does it further imply? As far as we can at present see, certainly as much as this. First, the entire absence of evil from the spirit. It would be impossible to be with Christ in any such sense, unless there were entire agreement in will and desire with Him. It would be impossible thus to see Him as He is without being like Him.

Let us imagine, if we can, the effect of the total extinction of evil in any one of our minds. How many energies, now tied

and bound with the chain of sin, would spring upward into action! How many imprisoned yearnings would burst their bonds, and carry us onward to higher degrees of good! And all these energies, all these yearnings, can exist in the disembodied spirit. It is in a waiting, a hoping state: the greater the upward yearnings, the greater the accumulated energies for God and His work, the higher will be the measure of glory to be attained after the redemption of the body, and the completion of the entire man.

Well—as another consequence, following close on the last, all *conflict*, from that same moment, is at an end. Conflict is ordained for us, is good for us, now. If it were to cease here below, we should fall back. We

have not entered into rest, it would not be good for us to enter into rest, in our present state. Here, this little platform, so to speak, of our personality, is drawn two ways, downward and upward: and it is for us who stand thereon to keep watch and ward that the downward prevail not; but from that moment the dark links of the downward chain will have been for ever severed, and the golden cord that is let down from the Throne will bear us upward and onward, unopposed. So that as to conflict, there will be perfect rest.

And let us remember another matter. If the departed spirit were during this time dwelling on its own unworthiness, casting back looks of self-reproach, weighing accurately God's mercies and its own requitals

during life past, there would of necessity be conflict: there would be bitter self-loathing, there would be pangs of repentance. It would seem, then, that during the incomplete and disembodied state, this is not so; but that all of this kind is reserved for a day when account is to be given in the body of things done in the body: and we shall see, when we come to treat of that day specially, how its accounts will be, for the blessed dead, itself made a blessing.

Again, as all evil will be at an end, and all conflict,—so will all labour. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so saith the Spirit, for they rest from their labours." Now labour here is a blessing, it is true: but it is also a weariness. It leads ever on to a greater blessing, the blessing

of rest. Christ has entered into His rest; and the departed spirit shall be with Christ; faring as He fares, and a partaker of His condition. Any who have lived the ordinary term of human life in God's service (for it is only of such that we are now speaking) can testify how sweet it is to anticipate a cessation of the toil and the harassing of life: to be looking on to keep the great Sabbath of the rest reserved for the people of God. What more may be reserved for us in the glorious perfect state which shall follow the resurrection, is another consideration altogether: but it clearly appears that the intermediate disembodied state is one of rest.

And let none cavil at the thought, that thus Adam may have rested his thousands

of years, and the last taken of Adam's children only a few moments. Time is only a relative term, even to us. A dream of years long may pass during the sound that awakens a man; and a sleep of hours appears but a second. What do we know of time, except as calculated by earthly objects? Day and night, the recurrence of meals,—these constitute time to us: shut up a man in darkness, and administer his food at irregular intervals, and he loses all count of time whatever. Surely, then, no cavil on this score can be admitted. In that presence where the departed spirits are, one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Let us conclude with a consideration, to a Christian the most glorious of all. The

spirit that is with Christ in nearest presence and consciousness knows Him as none know Him here. Here, we speak of His purity, His righteousness, His love, His triumph and glory, with miserably imperfect thoughts, and in words still more imperfect than our thoughts. We are obliged to employ earthly images to set forth heavenly things. The revelations of Scripture itself are made through a medium of man's invention, and are bounded by our limited vocabulary. But then it will be so no longer. The Apostle compares our seeing *here* to that of one who beholds the face of his friend in a mirror of metal, sure to be tarnished and distorting: and our vision *there* to beholding the same face to face,—the living features, the lips that move, the eyes that glisten.

That spirit which has but now passed away knows the love that passes our knowledge; contemplates things which God has prepared for them that love Him, such as eye has never seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive.

Therefore, beloved, let us be of good cheer concerning them that have fallen asleep through Jesus: and let us be of good cheer respecting ourselves. Good as it is to obey and serve God here, it has been far better for them to depart and to be with Christ; and it will be far better for us, if we hold fast our faith and our confidence in Him firm unto the end. If to us to live is Christ, then to us to die will be gain.

II.

WE stand to-day at this point in our consideration of the state of the blessed dead. They depart, and are with Christ. "This day," the day of the departure, they are consciously, blissfully, in His presence. Their faith is turned into sight: their misgivings are changed for certainty: their mourning for joy. Yet, we said, their state is necessarily imperfect. The complete condition of man is body, soul, and spirit. The former of these three, at all events, is wanting to the spirits and souls of the righteous. They are in a waiting, though in an inconceivably

blissful, state. Of the precise nature of that state,—of its employments, if employments it has, we know nothing. All would be speculation if we were to speak of these matters.

Our concern to-day is with the termination of that their incomplete condition. When shall it come to an end? We have this very definitely answered for us by St. Paul, in a chapter of which we shall have much to say, and in a verse of that chapter which we will take for our text, 1 Cor. xv. 23. Notice, he is speaking of the resurrection of the dead: and he says, "But EVERY ONE IN HIS OWN ORDER: CHRIST THE FIRST-FRUITS: AFTERWARD THEY THAT ARE CHRIST'S AT HIS COMING."

Well then: from these words it is clear

that the end of the expectant state of the blessed dead, and the reunion of their spirits with their risen bodies, will take place AT THE COMING OF CHRIST. Here at once we are met by a necessity to clear and explain that which these words import. In these days, it is by no means superfluous to say that we Christians do look forward to a real personal coming of our Lord Jesus Christ upon this our earth. I sometimes wonder whether ordinary Christian men and women ever figure to themselves what this means. I suppose we hardly do, because we fancy it is so far off from ourselves and our times, that we do not feel ourselves called upon to make it a subject of our practical thoughts. To this we might say, first, that we are by no means sure of this: and then, that even

if it were true, the interest of that time of His coming for every one of us is hardly lessened by its not being near us, seeing that if we be His, it will be, whenever it comes, the day of our resurrection from the dead. It is evidently the duty of every Christian man to make it part of his ordinary thoughts and anticipations—that return of the Lord Jesus from heaven, even as He was seen to go up into heaven. Now, our object to-day is to ascertain how much we know from Scripture, without indulging in speculations of our own, about this coming, and this resurrection which shall accompany it. The latter of these two we made the subject of a sermon a very few Sundays ago; but it was not so much with our present view, as to lay down the hope of resurrection as

an element among the foundations of the Christian life.

Now one of the first and most important revelations respecting this matter is found in the fourth chapter of 1 Thess., ver. 13—18. These Thessalonians had been, as we learn from the two epistles to them, strangely excited about the coming of the Lord's kingdom. Perhaps the Apostle's preaching among them had taken especially this form; for he was accused before the magistrates of saying that there was besides or superior to Cæsar another king, one Jesus. And in this excitement of the Thessalonians, fancying as they did that the Lord's coming would come in their own time, they thought that their friends who through Jesus had died a happy death were losers by not having lived

to witness the Lord's coming. Indeed, they sorrowed for them as those that had no hope: by which expression it seems likely that they even supposed them to be altogether cut off from the benefits and blessedness of that coming by not having been able to see it in the flesh. Thereupon St. Paul puts them right by saying,—using the same argument as in that great resurrection chapter, 1 Cor. xv.,—that "*if we believe that Jesus Himself died and rose again, even so also those who through Jesus have fallen asleep will God bring with Him,*" that is, will God bring back to us when He brings back to us Jesus.

You may just observe, by the way, that the whole force of what the Apostle says is very commonly lost, by a wrong method of

reading these words. We very commonly hear them read, "will God bring *with* him." But thus we, as I said, lose the force of the argument, which is: If Jesus, our first-fruits, our representative, died and rose again, so will all who die in union with Jesus rise again. And in order to that, the same power of God which brings Jesus back to us, will with Him, with Jesus, bring their spirits back, in order to that resurrection.

Well, what then? "*This we say unto you by the word of the Lord*"—thus the Apostle introduces, not an argument, not a command or saying of his own, but a special revelation—"*that we, which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord*" (for notice that at first, at the early time when these Thessalonian epistles were written, first of all St.

Paul's letters, the Apostle looked forward to that day of which neither man nor angel knoweth, as about to come on in his own time) shall have no advantage, no priority, over them which have fallen asleep. And why? For this reason—that "*the Lord Himself shall come down from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first:*" that is, shall rise before anything else happens—any changing, or summoning to the Lord, of us who are alive.

Now here let us pause in the sacred text, and consider what it is which we have before us. Mind, we are speaking to-day as the Apostle is speaking in this passage, entirely of the blessed dead; of those of whom it may be said that through Jesus their death

is but a holy sleep. We have clearly this before us: at a certain time, fixed in the counsels of God, the Father, known to no created being,—mysteriously unknown also, for He Himself assures us of this in words which no ingenuity can explain away, to the Son Himself in His state of waiting for it,—at that fixed time the Lord, that is Christ, shall appear in the sky, visible to men in His glorified body; and His coming shall be announced to men by a mighty call, a signal cry, and by the trumpet of God.

Now let me at once say that as to such expressions as this, when we are told that they cannot bear their literal meaning, but are only used in condescension to our human ways of speaking, and thus an attempt is made to deprive them in fact of all meaning,

I do not recognise any such rule of interpretation. If the *words* are used to suit our human ways of thinking, I can see no reason why the *things signified* by those words may not also be used to affect our senses, which will be still human, when the great day comes. As to the sound being heard by all, or as to the Lord being seen by all, I can with safety leave that to Him who made the eye and the ear, and believe that if He says so, He will find the way for it to be so.

Now let us follow on with the description. With the Lord Jesus, accompanying Him, though unseen to those below on the earth, will be the myriads of spirits of the blessed dead. And notice,—for it is an important point, since Holy Scripture is consistent with itself in another place on this matter,—that

at this coming none are with the Lord, no spirits of the departed, I mean, except those of the blessed dead. In other words, this is not the general coming to judgment, when the whole of the dead shall stand before God, but it is that first resurrection of which the Evangelist speaks in the Apocalypse, when he says, chap. xx. 5, "*The rest of the dead lived not again until* (a prescribed time which he mentions, whatever that may mean) *the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection; on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ.*"

Then, the Lord being still descending from heaven and on the way to this world, the dead in Christ shall rise first—the first thing:

the grave shall be opened, and the bodies of the saints that sleep shall come forth, and, for so the words surely imply, their spirits, which have come with the Lord, shall be united to those bodies, each to his own.

Here, again, I can see no difficulty. The same body, even to us now on earth, does not imply that the same particles compose it. And even the expression "the same body" is perhaps a fallacious one. In St. Paul's great argument on this subject in 1 Cor. xv. he expressly tells us, that it is not that body which was sown in the earth, but a new and glorified one, even as the beautiful plant, which springs from the insignificant or the ill-favoured seed, is not that which was sown, but a body which God has given. Whatever the bodies shall be, they will be recognised as

those befitting the spirits which are reunited to them, as they also befit the new and glorious state into which they are now entering.

This done, they who are alive and remain on earth, having been, which is not asserted here, but is in 1 Cor. xv., changed so as to be in the image of the incorruptible, spiritual, heavenly, will be caught up together with the risen saints in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: to *meet* Him, because He is in His way from heaven to earth, on which He is about to stand in that latter day.

Thus, then, the words which I have chosen for my text will have their fulfilment. Christ has been the first-fruits of this great harvest,—already risen, the first-born from the dead, the example and pattern of that which all His shall be. This was His order, His place

in the great procession from death unto life; and between Him and His, the space, indefinite to our eyes, is fixed and determined in the counsels of God. The day of His coming hastens onward. While men are speculating and questioning, God's purpose remains fixed. He is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness. His dealings with the world are on too large a scale for us to be able to measure them, but in them the golden rule is kept, every one in his own order. Christ's part has been fulfilled. He was seen alive in His resurrection body; He was seen taking up that body from earth to heaven. And now we are waiting for the next great event, His coming.

Wisely has the Church set apart a season

in every year in which this subject may be uppermost in our thoughts. For there is nothing we are so apt—nothing, we may say, that our whole race is so determined to forget and put out of sight. It is alien from our common ideas, it ill suits our settled notions, that the personal appearing of Him in whom we believe should break in upon the natural sequence of things in which we are concerned. And the consequence is, that you will hardly find, even among believing men, more than one here and there who at all realizes to himself, or has any vivid expectation of, this personal coming of Christ. Think of the Christian Church as taking its faith and hope from the New Testament; and then compare that faith and hope, as it actually exists with reference to this point,

with the New Testament,—and the discrepancy is most remarkable. In the days when it was written, eighteen hundred years ago, every eye was fixed on, every man's thought was busy about, the coming of the Lord. You will hardly find a chapter in the epistles in which it is not spoken of, or alluded to, with earnest anticipation and confidence. Whereas now, when it is brought so much nearer to us, it has almost vanished out of the consideration of the Church altogether. No doubt something may be said by way of reason why it should occupy a less prominent place in our thoughts than it did in theirs. The Lord's own words, and those of the Divinely-commissioned messengers who announced His return, spoke of it simply as certain. without any note of time being

attached. Hence, those who had seen Him depart believed that they themselves should behold Him returning. There can be no doubt in any fair-judging mind that, besides these eye-witnesses, St. Paul, when he wrote that fifth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, had a full persuasion that he himself should be of those on whom the house not made with hands, that is to be brought from heaven, was to be put, without his being unclothed from the earthly tabernacle. He looked at such unclothing in his own case as possible, but was confident that it would not happen so. And again, when, in the over-zeal of the Thessalonians, they imagined that the coming of the Lord was actually upon them, and he in his Second Epistle checks and sets right that premature

assumption, he does so in words which, as he wrote them, might very well have had all their fulfilment within the lifetime of man. Those words now appear to us in more of the true sense in which the Spirit, who spoke by Paul, intended them: we see that the apostasy there predicted, and the man of sin there set down as to be revealed, are great developments or concentrations of the unbelief of churches and nations; but there is no evidence that the men of that day saw any such meaning in the words. As it was gradually, and not without conflict of thought, revealed to Peter and his side of the apostolic band, that the Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs and partakers of the peace of Christ, so it was gradually, and not without some sickness of hope deferred, made manifest to the Church

that the coming of the Lord should be for ages and generations delayed. Unmistakable indications of this truth appear in the Lord's own prophetic discourses, which we now know how to interpret.

And all this is no doubt a reason why the great subject should be less constantly and less vividly before our minds than it was before theirs. But it is no reason why it should have dropped out altogether; none, why we should almost universally neglect the revelations of Scripture respecting the manner and details of His coming, and confuse them altogether in a vague popular idea of the judgment-day; none, why we should forget the mention of the landmarks which He Himself has pointed out along the wilderness journey of His Church,—and so, as

far as in us lies, provide for her being unprepared when He appears.

The end of the state of waiting of the blessed dead, the end of our present state of waiting, will be that day of His appearing. Let us fix this well in our minds; and do not let us be kept from doing so by being told that there is danger in allowing the fancy to exercise itself on the unfulfilled prophecies. No doubt there is. But I am not exhorting you to exercise your fancy on them. Faith and fancy are two wholly distinct things. To my mind, there can be hardly anything more detrimental to the faith of the Church than always to be fitting together history and prophecy, magnifying insignificant present or past events into fulfilments of prophetic announcements. They

who do this are for ever being refuted by the course of things; and then they shift their ground, and come out as confidently with a new scheme, as they did before with their old one. Nothing can more tend to throw discredit on God's prophetic word altogether; and it is no doubt in part owing to such speculations that faith in the Lord's coming has become weakened among us. He Himself has told us the great use of His announcements of the future. "*These things have I told you, that, when the time is come, ye may remember that I told you of them.*' When and as each prophecy comes to its time to be fulfilled, just as the years of the captivity predicted by Jeremiah were interpreted by the Church in Babylon, so the Lord's predictions, and the predictions of

His apostles, will fall each into its place; and the Church, if she endure in faith and watchfulness, will stand on her look-out, and be prepared for the sign of His coming.

Let us, my brethren, with regard to those who have left us in the Lord, let us, with regard to ourselves and our own future, be ever looking for and hasting to that day of God; the day when that better thing which God hath provided for us shall be manifested, and they with us shall be complete, who without us were not perfect.

And let us not be discouraged by unpromising signs, or by prevalent unbelief. Remember what our Master has said to us in the services of this day, "Heaven and earth shall pass away; but My words shall not pass away."

III.

WE have traced the condition of the blessed dead, from their departure and being with Christ, to the glorious day of the resurrection. Their spirits are safe in His keeping, till that day when He shall call their bodies out of the graves, and they shall be once more complete in manhood, body, soul, and spirit. And our present consideration is, What, in that resurrection, is the next thing which shall befall them? Now the best, because the most general, text on this matter is that in Heb. ix. 27, "IT IS APPOINTED UNTO MEN

ONCE TO DIE, BUT AFTER THIS THE JUDGMENT."

You will see that here is enounced something common to our nature. We are all to die; we are all to be judged after death. And that this is really true of all, and not merely stated generally, to be met afterwards by especial exceptions, St. Paul shows, when he, speaking of things belonging entirely to his own practice, and his own justification before God, says, in 2 Cor. v., "We labour, that whether present in the body or absent from the body, we may be accepted with Him. *For we must all be made manifest*" (there is nothing about *standing* in the original) "*before the judgment-seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that which he did,*

whether it be good or bad." You will see that here he expressly includes himself among those who are to be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ.

Now perhaps you are wondering why I am accumulating this Scripture evidence to show a matter which seems to all so plain. But I have a sufficient reason. And that reason is, because in other passages of Scripture the blessed dead, or rather the believers in Christ, whether living or dead at that day, are spoken of as if they were not subjected to the general judgment of all, but passed into the glorious life without undergoing that judgment. Thus our Blessed Lord Himself in John v. 24, says, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath eternal life, and*

cometh not unto judgment" (for that, and not "*condemnation*," is the word used by our Lord), "*cometh not unto judgment, but hath passed out of death into life.*" That would seem to mean that the faithful man has already passed over out of death, and all that belongs to death, sin, and guilt, and judgment, into life; and therefore when the judgment comes he can have no part in it, cannot come into it at all, because he is acquitted already through the faith in Him who bore his guilt and took away his sin. And similarly, again, a few verses further on, ver. 29, our Lord says, "*An hour cometh, in which all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of man, and shall come forth: they that have done good unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil unto the*

resurrection of judgment." That is, I suppose, the one shall rise into eternal life,—into the full bliss of the heavenly state, and the others into the condition, whatever it be, which the judgment shall decide. Of course I am fully aware that I have not quoted these texts as they are read in our English Bibles. The matter stands thus: the word which I have rendered "*judgment*" is the word always meaning judgment—the word occurring in the very next verse, where our Lord says, "*As I hear, I judge, and My* judgment *is just;*" the word used also above in ver. 22, where He says, "*The Father committed all* judgment *unto the Son.*" In those two places, because there was no difficulty, our translators kept the word "*judgment.*" But in these other two which I have quoted, because

there was an apparent difficulty, they changed "*judgment*" in one verse into "*condemnation*," and in the other into "*damnation*," without any reason or right soever. Indeed, in the latter of the two passages, not only is this so, but the whole sense is broken up by their unfaithfulness. Our Lord having mentioned the resurrection of judgment, proceeds to vindicate the justice of that judgment: "*As I hear, I judge: and My judgment is just, because I seek not Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me.*" So that the difficulty, which man's meddling with the Bible has tried to remove, does exist in the Bible as it came from God. And we must try to see through it, not to hush it up by being unfaithful to the plain language of our Lord.

Nor does it exist here only. Our Lord

Himself has given us one great description of the final day of judgment, in His own discourses; and another by the pen of His beloved apostle. We will take the latter first, as being, for our present purpose, the fuller of the two: and we will show in what remarkable point the two agree. In Rev. xx. 4, a passage to which we made reference last Sunday, we find the first resurrection taking place, and the faithful dead rising to reign with Christ during a period known as a thousand years. And it is expressly said, "*The rest of the dead lived not till the thousand years were finished.*" Now, I am not here taking upon me to explain the meaning of this, but merely to insist on the fact that, whatever may be the precise import, it is so stated. Well, and

what then? When the thousand years are expired, and when the last great victory of the cause of God over evil has been gained, then we read, "*And I saw a great white throne, and Him that sat on it; and I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them: and they were judged every man according to his works.*" So far the description in the Revelation. Now, in that given us by our Lord in Matt. xxv. we find the Son of man coming in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, and sitting on the throne of

His glory, and all the nations gathered before Him. But there is this singular coincidence with the other account, that when the King comes to address those on the right hand and those on the left, He says, "*Inasmuch as ye did it* (or *did it not*) *unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye did it* (or *did it not*) *unto Me.*" Now "*these My brethren*" cannot of course mean the angels; therefore there must be some with Christ to whom the words must refer. In other words, we have here also the risen saints in glory with the Lord, as in that other account.

But we may go even further yet, and may discover more from Scripture respecting the position and employment of these the saints who are with the Lord. When St. Paul, in 1 Cor. vi., is dissuading the Corinthians from

taking their disputes before the heathen courts to be settled, he says, "*Know ye not that the saints shall judge the world?*" and again, "*Know ye not that we shall judge angels?*" Such expressions as these can bear but one meaning, and that is, that the saints of Christ are actually to bear part in the judgment, as His assessors. Further than this we know not. It is not our duty to be wise above that which is written; but it is our duty to be wise up to that which is written: otherwise it was written in vain.

What, then, are we to say respecting this apparent discrepancy in the statements of Holy Scripture concerning the dead in Christ? If it be true that it is appointed unto all men once to die, but after that the judgment; if it be true that we all, including even the apostles

themselves, shall be manifested, laid open, before the judgment-seat of Christ, how can it be also true that the believer in Christ has already passed from death into life, and therefore cometh not into judgment at all? How can it be true that while others shall rise to a resurrection of judgment, he shall rise to a resurrection of life? How can those descriptions be correct which we have been quoting, of these living and reigning with Christ long before the general judgment, and even taking part in it with Him?

I believe the answer is not difficult, and perhaps may best be found by remembering another variety of expression in Scripture respecting a kindred matter; I mean the way in which the saints of God are spoken of in relation to death itself. On the one hand, we

know that it is appointed unto all men to die; and that the faith and service of the Lord bring with them no exemption from the common lot of all mankind. Not only is this proved every day before our eyes, but Scripture gives us its most direct testimony that those who believe in Christ must expect it. The very expressions, "*the dead in Christ,*" "*those who through Jesus have fallen asleep,*" show that this is so. Yet again, on the other hand, some passages would almost look as if death itself for the Christian man did not exist. Christ is said to have abolished death; we learn from His own lips that "if a man keep His word he shall never taste of death;" He has said again, "He that liveth and believeth in Me shall never die." Now in this case there is no practical difficulty, yet the

variety of expression is very instructive. We all know what lies beneath it; namely, the fact, that though the believer in Christ must undergo the physical suffering of death like other men, yet death has become to him so altogether without terror and curse that it has been for him deprived of real existence and power. The apostle in Rom. viii. gives the full explanation: "*the body indeed is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of righteousness.*"

Well, now let us apply this to the case before us. Let us take the same solution, and see whether it will not suffice. The Christian shall, like other men, undergo the judgment after death; thus one set of Scripture declarations shall be fulfilled. But to the believer, who has died in the Lord, what

is the judgment? He stands before the judgment-seat, perfect in the righteousness of Him to whom he is united, and from whom death has not separated him. His sentence of acquittal has been long ago pronounced; he cometh not into judgment, so that it should have any substantial effect in changing or determining his condition. The resurrection is for him not a resurrection of judgment, not one in which the judgment is the leading feature and characteristic, but it is only and purely a resurrection of and unto life: one in which life is the leading feature and idea.

Thus for the blessed dead the judgment has no dark side: "there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." But though it has no dark side, it has a bright

one. Never for a moment do the Christian Scriptures lose sight of the Christian reward. Those who die in the Lord, like the rest of men, shall be laid open before the tribunal of Christ. Their sins have been purged away in His atoning blood; they have been washed and justified and sanctified in the name of Jesus and by the Spirit of their God.

But to what end? for what purpose? Was it merely that they might be saved? No indeed, but that God might be glorified in them by the fruits of their faith and love.

And these fruits shall then be made known. The Father who saw them in secret shall then reward them openly. The acts done and the sacrifices made for the name of Christ shall then meet with glorious

retribution; yea, even to the least and most insignificant of them, even according to our Lord's own words,—to the cup of cold water given to one of His little ones.

It is much the fashion, I know, in our days, to put aside and to depreciate this doctrine of the Christian reward. It looks to some people like a sort of reliance on our own works and attainments; and so, though they may in the abstract profess a belief in it because it is in Scripture, they shrink from applying it in their own cases or in those of others. Now, nothing can justify such a course. We have no right to discard a motive held up for our adoption and guidance in Scripture. And that this is so held up, who that knows his Bible can for a moment doubt? Think of that saying

of our Lord about the cup of cold water just quoted, think of the series of sayings of which it is the end, "*He that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man, shall receive a righteous man's reward,*" etc. Think, again, of that series of commands, to do our alms, our prayers, our abstinences, in secret, each ending with, "*and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.*" Think, again, of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, where the great final blessing at the hand of the Lord is throughout represented to us as reward, or rather—for so the word used properly means—wages for work done. And it is in vain in this case to try to escape from the cogency of our Lord's sayings by alleging that the doctrines of the Cross

were not manifested till after His death and glorification. For if this were so, then the apostles themselves had never learned those doctrines. For the apostles constantly and persistently set before us the aiming at the Christian reward as their own motive, and as that which ought to be ours. Hear St. Paul saying that, if he preached the gospel as matter of duty only, it was the stewardship committed to him; but if freely and without pay, a reward, or wages, would be due to him. Hear him again, in expectation of his departure, glorying in the certainty of his reward: "*I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge shall give me at*

that day: and not to me only, but to all them also that love His appearing." Listen to St. John, whom we are accustomed to regard as the most lofty and heavenly of all the apostles in his thoughts and motives. What does he say to his well-beloved Gaius? "*Look to yourselves, that we lose not the things which we have wrought, but that we receive the full reward.*" Listen, again, to the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, that apostolic man, eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures, and hear him describing the very qualities and attributes of faith, that he who cometh to God must *believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him*, and saying of one of the first and brightest examples of faith, that *he had respect unto the recompense of reward.*

So, then, these holy dead who have died in the Lord will in that judgment have each his reward allotted him according to his service and according to his measure. Then the good that has been done in secret will all come to light. All mere profession, all that has been artificial and put on, will drop off as though it had never been; and the real kernel of the character, the fair dealing and charity and love of the inner soul, will be made manifest before men and angels. Then, not even the least work done for God and for good will be forgotten.

How such an estimate of all holy men will be or can be made and published, utterly surpasses our present powers to imagine. We have no faculties now whereby to deal thus truly and fairly with all

men: our organs of sense in this present state, and the minds themselves to which those organs convey impressions, are too feeble and limited for the effort required to apprehend all respecting all, as we shall then apprehend it. But this need not form any difficulty in our way to believe that such a thing shall be. The power to understand it and the power to receive it surely do not dwell farther off from our matured powers now, than the full powers of a grown-up man from the faculties and conceptions of a child. In all such matters we are children now. Think we then of the blessed dead at that day of the resurrection, as rising sure of bliss and of their perfection in Him to whom they were united; being as though there were no judgment, seeing that they

have One who shall answer for them at the tribunal: judged notwithstanding before the bar of God, and passing not to condemnation, but to their exceeding great and eternal reward.

One more thing only now is left us: to ask what we know of that last and perfected state of man—that highest development and dignity of our race, when body, soul, and spirit, freed from sin and sorrow, shall reign with Christ in light.

With that question, and its answer, we hope to conclude this course of sermons next Sunday.

IV.

WE are to speak to-day of the final state of bliss of those who have died in the Lord. Their state of waiting has ended; the resurrection has clothed them again with the body, the final judgment has passed over them, and their last unending state has begun. There are no words in Holy Scripture so well calculated to give a general summary of that state as those concluding ones of a passage from which I have before largely quoted; 1 Thess. iv. 17: "AND SO SHALL WE EVER BE WITH THE LORD.

For these words contain in them all that

has been revealed of that glorious state, included in one simple description. The bliss of the moment after death consisted in being with Christ: the bliss of unlimited ages can only be measured by the same. Nearness to Him that made us, union with Him who redeemed us, the everlasting and unvexed company of Him who sanctifieth us: what glory, what dignity, what happiness can be imagined for man greater than this?

And yet it is not by dwelling upon this, and this alone, that we shall be able to arrive at even that appreciation of heaven which is within our present powers. We may take these words, "for ever with the Lord," and we may find in them, as in our Father's house itself, many mansions. In various ways we are far from the Lord here;

in various ways we shall be near Him and with Him there.

But first of all we must approach these various mansions through their portals and the avenues which lead up to them. And one of those is the consideration, who, and of what sort, they shall be of whom we are about to speak. It will be very necessary that we should conceive of them aright.

Well, then, they will be men, with bodies, souls, and spirits like ourselves. The disembodied state will be over, and every one will have been reunited to the body which he or she had before death. What do we know of this body? Very glorious thoughts rise up in our minds when we think of it; but in this course of sermons I am not speculating; I am inquiring soberly what is re-

vealed to us about the blessed dead. Well then, again, what do we know of this body of the resurrection? In Phil. iii. 21, there is a revelation on this point. It is there said that "our home is in heaven, from whence also we expect the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change the body of our degradation that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory." And this change is very much dwelt on as a necessary condition of the heavenly state, in 1 Cor. xv. "*Flesh and blood*," we are told, *i.e.*, this present natural or psychical body, the body whose informing tenant is the animal soul, *cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither can corruption*, that which decays and passes away, *inherit incorruption*, that state where there is no decay nor passing away. So,

then, a change must take place at the resurrection: a change which shall pass also on those who are alive and remain at the Lord's coming. The bodies of the risen saints, and of those who are to join them in being for ever with the Lord, will be spiritual bodies: bodies tenanted and informed in chief by that highest part of man, which during this present life is so much dwarfed down and crushed by the usurpations of the animal soul; viz., his spirit.

Now, it would be idle to conceal the fact, that we cannot form any distinct conception what this spiritual body may be. No such thing has ever come within the range of our experience. But some particulars we do know about it, because God has revealed them. And of those, the principal are speci-

fied in this very passage: "*It is sown in corruption: it is raised in incorruption.*" It cannot decay. Eternal ages will pass over it, and it will remain the same. Again, "*it is sown in dishonour: it is raised in glory.*" There will be no shame about it, as there will be no sin. Thus much from these words is undoubted. What else they may imply we cannot say for certain; probably, unimagined degrees of beauty and radiancy, for so the word glory as applied to anything material seems to imply. Further: "*it is sown in weakness: it is raised in power.*" That is, I suppose, with all its faculties wonderfully intensified, and possibly with fresh faculties granted, which here it never possessed, and the mind of man could not even imagine. This last also seems to be implied

by its being called a spiritual body. As here it was an animal body, subject to the mere animal life or soul, hemmed in by the conditions of that animal life, so there it will be under the dominion of, and suited to the wants of, man's spirit, the lofty and heavenly part of him.

And if we want to know what this implies, our best guide will be to contemplate the risen body of our Lord, as we have it presented to us in the gospel narrative. As He is, so are we in this world in our essence even now; and as He is so shall we be entirely there. He is the first-fruits, we follow after as the harvest. What, then, was His resurrection body? While it was a real body and admitted of being touched and seen, and had the organs of voice and hearing, yet

it was not subjected to the usual conditions of matter as to its locomotion, or its obstruction by intervening objects. It retained the marks of what had happened before death. In order to convince the disciples of His identity, our Lord ate and drank before them. We must therefore infer that these were natural acts of His resurrection body, and not merely assumed at pleasure.

With a body, then, of this kind will the blessed be clothed upon at the resurrection, and remain invested for ever in glory. Now let us see what further flows from this as an inference. We may further say, that we have implied in it a surrounding of external circumstances fitted to such a state of incorruptibility and glory. Man redeemed and glorified will not be a mere spirit in the

vast realms of space, but a glorious body moving in a glorious world. Nor is this mere inference, however plain and legitimate. Holy Scripture is full of it. The power of words does not suffice to describe the beauties and glories of that renewed and unfading world. I need not quote passage after passage—they are familiar to you all. Nor, again, is it nature alone which shall be glorious above all our conception here. It would appear that art also shall have advanced forward, and shall minister to the splendour of that better world. The prophets in the Old Testament, and the beloved apostle in the New, vie with one another in describing the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, adorned as a bride for her husband, lighted by the glory of the indwelling Godhead.

Where this glorious abode of Christ and His redeemed shall be, we have not been told by revelation; and it were idle to indulge in speculations of our own. From some expressions in Scripture, it would seem not improbable that it may be this earth itself after purification and renewal: from other passages, it would appear as if that inference were hardly safe, and that other of the bodies in space are destined for the high dignity of being the home of the sons of God.

We have now, I believe, cleared the way for the answer to a question which presses upon us to-day: as far, at least, as that answer can be given on this side death. Of mankind in glory, thus perfected, what shall be the employ? For I need hardly press it

on you that it is impossible to conceive of man in a high and happy estate, without an employment worthy of that estate, and in fact constituting its dignity and happiness.

Now, some light is thrown on this inquiry by Holy Scripture, but it must be confessed that it is very scanty. It is true that all our meditations on and descriptions of heaven want balance, and are, so to speak, pictures ill composed. We first build up our glorified human nature by such hints as are furnished us in Scripture: we place it in an abode worthy of it: and then, after all, we give it an unending existence with nothing to do. It was not ill said by a great preacher, that most people's idea of heaven was to sit on a cloud and sing psalms. And others, again, strive to fill this out with the bliss of recog-

nising and holding intercourse with those from whom we have been severed on earth. And beyond all doubt such recognition and intercourse shall be, and shall constitute one of the most blessed accessories of the heavenly employment; but it can no more be that employment itself than similar intercourse on earth was the employment of life itself here. To read some descriptions of heaven, one would imagine that it were only an endless prolongation of some social meeting; walking and talking in some blessed country with those whom we love. It is clear that we have not thus provided the renewed energies and enlarged powers of perfected man with food for eternity. Nor, if we look in another direction, that of the absence of sickness and care and

sorrow, shall we find any more satisfactory answer to our question. Nay, rather shall we find it made more difficult and beset with more complication. For let us think how much of employment for our present energies is occasioned by, and finds its very field of action in, the anxieties and vicissitudes of life. They are, so to speak, the winds which fill the sail and carry us onward. By their action, hope and enthusiasm are excited. But suppose a state where they are not; and life would become a dead calm; the sail would flap idly, and the spirit would cease to look onward at all. So that unless we can supply something over and above the mere absence of anxiety and pain, we have not attained to—nay, we are farther than ever from—a sufficient employment for the

life eternal. Now, before we seek for it in another direction, let us think for a moment in this way. Are we likely to know much of it? We have before in these sermons adopted St. Paul's comparison by analogy, and have likened ourselves here to children, and that blessed state to our full development as men. Now ask yourselves, what does the child at its play know of the employments of the man? Such portions of them as are merely external and material he may take in, and represent in his sport: but the work and anxiety of the student at his book, and the man of business at his desk, these are of necessity entirely hidden from the child. And so it is onward through the advancing stages of life. Of each of them it may be said, "We know not with what

we must serve the Lord, until we come thither."

So that we need not be utterly disappointed if our picture of heaven be at present ill-composed: if it seem to be little else than a gorgeous mist after all. We cannot fill in the members of the landscape at present. If we could, we should be in heaven.

Remembering this our necessary incapacity for the inquiry, let us try to carry it as far as we may. And that we may not be forsaking the guidance of Holy Scripture for mere speculation, let us take the words of St. Paul, "*Now we see in a mirror, obscurely, but then face to face: now I know in part, but then I shall know even as also I was known (by God).*" This immense accession of light and knowledge must of course be interpreted

partly of keener and brighter faculties wherewith the blessed shall be endowed; but shall it not also point to glorious employment of those renewed and augmented powers? How could one endowed with them ever remain idle? What a restless, ardent, many-handed thing is genius even here below! How the highly endowed spirit searches about and tries its wings, now hither now thither, in the vast realms of intellectual life! And if it be so here, with the body weighing on us, with the clogs of worldly business and trivial interruption, what will it be there, where everything will be fashioned and arranged for this express purpose, that every highest employment may find its noblest expansion without let or hindrance? Besides, think for a moment of the relative positions of men with

regard to any even the least amount of this light and knowledge of which we are speaking. In order to take in this the better, think of the lowest and most ignorant of mankind who shall attain to that state of glory. Measure the difference between such a spirit and an Augustine, and then recollect that Augustine himself, that St. Paul himself, was but a child in comparison of the maturity of knowledge and insight which all shall there acquire. Such a thought may serve to show us what a gap must be bridged over, before any such perfect knowledge will be attained by any of the sons of men. And when we remember that all blessings come by labour and the goodly heat of exercised energy, shall we deny to the highest of all states the choicest of all blessings? So that the attain-

ment of, and advance in, the light and knowledge peculiar to that glorious land must be imagined as affording unending employment for the blessed hereafter. And this gives us another insight into the matter. As there is so great disparity among men here, so we may well believe will there be there. All Scripture goes to show that there will be no general equalizing, no flat level of mankind. Degrees and ranks as they now are, indeed, there will be none. Not the possession of wealth, not the accident of birth, which are held here to put difference between man and man, will make any distinction there: but inequality and distinction will proceed on other grounds; the amount of service done for God, the degree of entrance into the obedience and knowledge of Him, these will

put the difference between one and another there.

But we hasten to a close: and in doing so, we come back to the simple words of our text, "for ever with the Lord;" and we would leave on your minds the impression that these, after all, furnish the best key to the employment of the blessed in heaven. If they are fit companions for the Lord, then must they be like Him as He is there; and thus we seem to have marked out an employment alone sufficient for eternity. Look at it in its various aspects.

What is, what will be, the Lord doing in that state of blessedness? Will He be idle, like the gods of Epicurus, sitting serene above all, and separate from all, created things? No, indeed, no such glorified Lord

is revealed to us in Holy Scripture. "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." The created universe will be then as much beholden to His upholding hand as it is now. If they are to be for ever with Him, attending and girding His steps, they, too, will doubtless be fellow-workers with Him there, as they were here. And in this, only consider how much of His creation was altogether hidden from them here! Look abroad on a starry night—behold a field of employment for those who shall be ever with the Lord. The greater part of His works never came within sight of this our mortal eye at all. These are only hints, it is true, which we have no power of following out: but they may serve for finger-posts to point to whole realms of possible blessed employment.

Then, again, there is more in the words "for ever with the Lord" than even this. Who can tell what past works, not of creation only, but of grace also, the blessed may have to search into—works wrought on themselves and others which may then be brought back to them by memory entirely restored, and then first studied with any power to comprehend or to be thankful for them?

Then, again, the glory of God Himself, then first revealed to them,—the redeeming love of Christ,—the glory of the mystery of the indwelling of the Spirit,—dry and lofty subjects to the sons of men here, will be to them when there as household words and as daily pursuits. It seems to me, my brethren, when we look at all these sources of blessed employment, though we are un-

able from our present weakness to follow them out into detail,—and when we think that perhaps after all in our earthly blindness we may be omitting some which shall there constitute the chief, it seems to me, I say, as if we should have to complain not of insufficient employ for the ages of eternity, but of an infinite and inexhaustible variety, for which even endless ages of limited being hardly seem to suffice.

Such, then, beloved, are the thoughts which have occurred to us on a subject of which I pray that it may be one of personal interest to every one here present.

When we are to leave this present state is a matter hidden from our eyes, and not dependent on ourselves: but how we will leave it, whether as the Lord's blessed ones,

or with no part in Him, this is left for ourselves to determine. There is set before us life and death. May we choose life, that it may be well with us; that we may wake from the bed of death and find ourselves with the Lord; that we may pass in joyful hope through the waiting and disembodied state, and wake at the morning of the resurrection to that fulness of completed bliss of which we have this day been speaking.

The Coming of the Bridegroom.

The Coming of the Bridegroom.

I.

"Then [*more properly*, at that time] shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom."—MATT. XXV. 1.

ET us listen, during the season which is now come upon us, to this Advent parable of our blessed Lord. While I set it before you, and endeavour to trace its meaning, and point its application, and while you hear and judge what I say,—may the same great Spirit of truth and wisdom rest upon us both.

The first little word with which the parable begins is of great importance. Very often "then" in our version of the Scriptures is

almost insignificant; represents only the constantly recurring "but" or "and" of the original, serving merely to join parts of a narrative or discourse together, that there may not be an abrupt break between them. But here it is not so. "Then" in this place renders the Greek adverb of time, and, as I said in giving out the text, would have better been expressed by "At that time." The obvious question therefore to ask is, 'At *what* time?' And it will be best answered by referring to what went before. On doing so, we find that our Lord had just been speaking of the time during which He, the Master of the household, should be absent, and His coming expected.

Now I do not intend to trouble you in these sermons with any precisely detailed views as to the order of fulfilment of the various parts of this great prophetical discourse. Such

views I entertain, and am prepared in proper time and place to defend. But I do not believe this to be the time nor the place. Nor again do I think every one bound to state, or even to have settled for himself, such views in dealing with our Lord's words. Those words have, besides their precise and primary application, manifold references, extending over the whole lifetime of His Church: and we may take large and most profitable draughts of spiritual sustenance from them, without even attempting to taste their depths.

And thus in the case before us we may, if it seem best, regard the time described by Christ as covering the whole of the period intervening between His removal from us and the second Advent; the time during which it might be said by the servant, "My Lord delayeth his coming;" the time, in short, in

which we live. The chief and strict application of the parable may be, and I believe, is, to one portion of that long interval; but unquestionably, it is not applicable to that portion only.

At that time, then,—at the time when the Lord shall be absent, the faithful servants watching, the unfaithful thinking His delay warrants them in forgetting and disobeying Him; the Church keeping alive the promise of His coming, and the world questioning and scoffing at it,—at that time the kingdom of heaven, that is, the Church of God,—the state of the society of God's servants on earth,—shall be likened as follows. I have not as yet proceeded to quote the words of the similitude, because I would first direct your attention to the similitude itself.

The Lord likens the relation between Him-

self and His Church to that of marriage. And do not let us, because this likeness is very frequently used by Him, and of Him, in the other Scriptures, pass it over as matter of course, or lose its full significance here. The figure, as we are elsewhere told, signifies to us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church: *i.e.*, the union in spirit, and in a region beyond the ordinary thoughts and conceptions of men. This intimate and blessed accord and oneness is represented to us as being not yet fully accomplished. We are waiting for its accomplishment when the Bridegroom of our souls shall return to claim us, and we shall begin an eternal life of ineffable bliss in His glorious presence. And inasmuch as all who are His, who have loved and obeyed Him, are one in Him, and inasmuch as the great day of His return will be

one and the same for them all, that day is represented to us as the full accomplishment of His marriage to His Church; with reference especially to that day, He is the Bridegroom, she is the Bride: and that day is the wedding day, and its feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb. For that day the Bride the Church, the aggregate of all the souls who are betrothed and espoused to Christ, is represented as evermore, during His absence, preparing herself. The cry of joy in that day is, "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour unto Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready."

But as the whole Church is said to be ready when the number of the elect is accomplished and God's glorious kingdom is come: so in the gradual filling up of that number, the

readiness of the Church is made up of the readiness of her individual members; and each in his place and turn is called upon to be ready.

And again, as for the whole Church that final day is the consummation of her union with Him who gave Himself for her, and purchased her for His own, so for each one of us that shall, in a very solemn though not in an entire and final sense, be the day of His coming to us, when He shall loose the bands that bind us to the body and summon us to Himself. If not made ready for Him by then, we know not when the preparation can take place at all.

Now, bearing these things in mind, let us advance to the imagery of the parable.

In it the time of the wedding is at hand, and the bridegroom is expected, with his

procession, to fetch home his bride. But our attention is chiefly directed to a company whose business it was to wait his coming, just as it is ours to wait the coming of our heavenly Bridegroom. This company consists of ten persons—the usual number among the Jews signifying completeness, the least number which they held to constitute a society or a congregation, the number which, suggested probably by its occurrence in our own bodily arrangement, forms the basis of all our numeration. This number then signifies the whole—the Churches on earth—all the individual members of those Churches: for notice, it is not *anything in* that kingdom, but the kingdom itself, which is thus likened.

Now how are these persons described? They are given a name which it is true belongs as a matter of course to the circum-

stances of the marriage in the parable, but for which there is beyond doubt a deeper reason. These persons are called virgins. And thereby, to any mind conversant with Scripture imagery, is conveyed the idea of purity, and of devotion to the service of the true God. Those who have forsaken Him, and have gone after idols, are described in Holy Writ as impure, and guilty of spiritual unfaithfulness to their Lord. There are none such in this company. They are all His; all we may say, cleansed with the washing of the water by the Word, and reserved for Him.

Well, and what *did* this company of virgins? "They took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom." The description is important in every particular. And of all the minor particulars, the *lamps* are no doubt the most important, for the whole lesson of the

parable turns upon them. They took their lamps: in the older and better copies of our Greek text, "their own lamps," and it is generally now so read,—"They took their own lamps," each her own. What does this mean? Something of her own, peculiarly belonging to herself, each of these virgins took. Her attention was directed to this, without which her errand would have been vain. Others may have possessed a similar thing, but these took care to have it with them as an especial object of attention. It seems to me that thus is exactly represented the awakening to the existence and the care of the soul, by which the religious—the member of Christ's Church—is distinguished from the irreligious, who knows not of his soul, nor cares for it. Remark the language of Scripture symbolism elsewhere: "The spirit of man

is the candle of the Lord." Those who are baptized, those who have confirmed the vow of their baptism, may be said to have taken their lamps. They have taken their souls in hand. A light is kindled within them, to keep burning, as we shall more abundantly see by-and-by, till the Husband of their souls comes. That which with the greatest poet of old Rome was the lamp of this life, delivered by one to another, as by runners in a race, with us Christians is the lamp of a more glorious life—a lamp far more our own than this flitting flame that warms our mortal blood. The ten virgins took their own lamps. Even so, brethren and sisters, does every member of the Church. You and I have taken our lamps; we know we have immortal souls, we have taken them in hand, grasped them, so to speak, and are standing with them,

not forgotten, not hidden, but objects of attention, objects of care. We cannot be as if we had not taken our lamps. When these ten went out of their houses, when they passed the streets, all could see them, all could observe them. O virgin soul! baptized into Christ, newly confirmed, it may be, in that profession, lately come from the Lord's table in the fulness of the same profession, you have taken, you have each time retaken your lamp. In the darkness of the world, in the dimness of the Church, there you stand with your lamp, for all to see, for all to remark on, for some to steer their way by. O see how you bear this lamp!

But more. The ten virgins took their own lamps, and—did what? Did they sit at home? No; they *went forth* to meet the bridegroom. Went forth—into the night.

It might be cold; it might be stormy; dark it certainly was: but they went forth. As we just said, they would be sure to attract notice. The crowd would gather; insolent remarks might be made; but they went forth. And so it is again with every member of Christ's Church; with every member, that is, worthy to be called one at all. His whole course is a going forth. As holy Paul was so fond of calling it, it is a walk, and he is a pilgrim. He *goes forth* to meet the Bridegroom. Even as Christian, in that grandest of allegories, with which we are all familiar, went forth from the City of Destruction.

And what does this mean, translated into life's language? What, but this? With the man of the world, with the woman of the world, the world is *home*. Its rules govern life: its hopes attract, its terrors terrify, and nothing

else. But the member of Christ's Church, the worthy baptized person, the earnest confirmed person, the honest and upright communicant, has shut the door of the world behind him, and taken his lamp and his pilgrim's staff, and is on his journey. He has gone forth. Not bodily, but in resolve, in spirit, in obedience. He may look at common times like other people: but let darkness fall around; let a great mist render the way uncertain, and there he is going straight on with his lamp. He knows the way, and he treads it firmly; his path is as a shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

And, as we saw just now, there may be many things to deter him from going forth. It is not a pleasant process, the first time we have thus to shut the door of the world behind us, and fare forth as the despised pilgrim.

Inside the world, the bright fire, the social group, the merry talk; and outside, the dark, the cold, or the storm. Such a trial may come to the schoolboy, after his heart has been softened by holy words, and he has registered his vow before God, and has come from his first banquet with his Lord. The cheery converse may be at its height amid a group of old companions; and there may come a moment when the honour of his heavenly Captain and the vow of his plighted faith must bring scorn upon him, if he have any truth in him; and from that moment popularity must be cast off like a slough, and earned again like a new and better raiment: instead of accustomed applause, his lot may be cold aversion—from some at least, and for a season. Or the call may come upon some of you, earning your livelihood by resting late and rising early, and

with nothing to spare. Some hitherto allowed practice, some trick of trade, may be revealed to your conscience as you leave God's house, or rise from your bedside, as a thing which ought not to be done: the very practice, perhaps, on which depended your little profits, and the world's esteem, and your place in your street, and in your trade. Within, there is comfort, competence, the respect of men: but you must go forth, my brother, if you would form part of the kingdom of heaven, out of the comfortable brotherhood of the lax and unconscientious, into the dark and the cold, with your lamp in hand to guide you. For the description of us all who shall come to Christ's joy is this: "These are they that washed their robes—these are they that were redeemed from the world—these are they that were not defiled—for they are virgins." They have

taken their lamps, and gone forth from the world.

And lastly, *For what* have the ten virgins gone forth? Not for a journey without an aim; but "to meet the bridegroom." O my friends, what an object is this!

First, it is a definite object. "I know whom I have believed." "I sought Him whom my soul loveth." The ten virgins had been expressly selected for this office. They knew him who was the centre of the night's festival, and he knew them. And so it is too in the kingdom of heaven. One is the Bridegroom, and One only. Ask the angels, and they know Him. They sung of His birth, they ministered to His weakness, they watched in His tomb, they behold Him in His glory, they are waiting to come with Him. Ask the powers of nature—they know

Him: the winds and the seas were hushed at His word, and the sun veiled his face at His passion. Ask the sons of men—the glorious company of the apostles praise Him: the goodly fellowship of prophets praise Him: the noble army of martyrs praise Him: the holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge Him. Stand in the midst of any congregation—question any Christian family—knock at the door of any believing heart—these know Him. It is this Bridegroom—it is THE Bridegroom, that we have gone forth to meet. This is the attitude of every Christian Church, and of every Christian soul, in all the long ages of history—gone forth to meet the Bridegroom. He is the Desire of heaven and earth; all nature groans to see Him: every step in what we call history, all the boasted advances of men in knowledge

and power, all the gathering infatuations of princes and hierarchies,—these are but the preparations of His way under whose feet all things shall be placed in the end. If we have gone forth to meet Him, there is no doubt about the aim of our journey.

Next, it is a glorious object. He is the Bridegroom—of His Church, and of every individual soul in it. And as in that blessed relation the man is the head of the woman, so the Head of every one of us is Christ: the Head of all this nature which we bear about us—the most glorious Person in our nature. And when we go forth to meet Him, every step of that our journey is a step nearer to being absolutely one with Him. When we see Him as He is, when we look in His blessed face, when we clasp His pierced hands, we shall be, we must be, like Him. And this is

as much as to say that all that progress, of going forth to meet the Bridegroom, is a raising up of our poor persons and our poor characters to the most glorious state of which they are capable: a fulfilling of the very highest end and aim for which our spirits and souls and bodies were created and sent into this world.

And therefore, next again, it is a final object, this going forth to meet the Bridegroom. There are many by-aims and ends in life: many pursuits of such a nature that if anything solemn were to happen they must be broken off as incongruous—all their time and trouble wasted, and another course begun. But this is never so with the going forth to meet the Bridegroom. He who is on this journey never need turn aside. All life is included in it: no energy is misbestowed on it

Is any afflicted? There is no road like this for comfort. Is any merry? There is no track like this for enjoyment. Why should they who have set forth to meet their soul's chief desire be daunted by the brambles on the path? How should they who are bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb do otherwise than rejoice?

If then this journey be definite, worthy of a wise man's determination, if it be glorious, able to fulfil our highest wishes and desires; if it be final, so as to contain and to be the one end of life: and more than all this, if it be that to which we, members of Christ's Church, are bound and pledged,—in the name of all these considerations, and of Him who is the spring and centre of them all, let us renew our vigour in treading this road: let us all at this new Advent time

take our lamps, and go forth to meet the Bridegroom.

To *meet* the Bridegroom—then He is coming. Yes, He is coming. Let it be no scorn to any of us to avow and to act on this simple belief. Let others search and calculate, and let us reap all lawful fruit from their discovery of truth, knowing that all truth is God's. But here we take our stand: we know that that glorified Form of the Son of man and the Son of God lives and upholds all things by the word of His power: and is waiting to visit this earth in His Person. We cannot say when, but this touches not our faith.

This knowledge, this hope, we will yield for no man; persuaded that when other knowledge fails it shall stand; when all the rest of human hopes are disappointed, it alone shall end in perfect fulfilment.

II.

"And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps."—MATT. xxv. 2—4.

WE have already considered the preliminaries of this great parable. We have seen the ten virgins take their lamps, and go forth to meet the bridegroom. We have also ventured to enter upon the general application. We spoke of these ten as representing, throughout the dispensation of waiting for the Lord's advent under which we live, those who, in dedication of themselves to Him, have taken in hand, so to speak, their souls, and have gone forth, undertaken the Christian journey, left, in heart and in the main issues of life, the world and its maxims; and all this for the sake of meeting the Bridegroom—that is, of being

ready for their Lord and Saviour when He shall come.

And we said that, however there may be in the parable a primary and definite meaning, belonging to a particular period of the Church and an especial coming of the Lord, it was not our intention in this course of sermons or from this place to press that precise meaning, but to deal, now and here, with that particular reference which beyond doubt these words of Christ, like many other of His words, were intended to bear.

Well then, we are now ready to proceed. Fix your attention, I pray you, on these ten faithful souls, come out from the world with the intent to wait for their heavenly Bridegroom. And first let us say a word or two to make all clear about them: to be sure that we are not doing them wrong, and losing

thereby some instruction which we were meant to gain.

Look at them as they go forth. All are alike. In the circumstances of the parable, as gathered by the rule of ordinary life, we may conceive of them as dressed alike, ornamented alike, with lamps probably of the same showing and pattern. We have no right to say that any one of them was unworthy of the position which she occupied: as, for instance, that she was indifferent to the occasion, or, if we choose to go into the deeper significance of the parable, unfaithful to the bridegroom. And in the interpretation too, we have no right, as has been often done, to say that they are not all alike earnest, God-fearing, Christ-loving members of His Church: no right to charge any among them with hypocrisy, or want of

earnestness. We have only a right to assume so much difference between any among them and any others among them, as is warranted by the parable itself. And how much that is, will be plain from our opening words to-day: "*And five of them* (I give you the verses as now generally read after the most ancient authorities) *were foolish, and five were wise.*" This is the distinction. Not one of earnestness, not one of godliness, not one of singleness of purpose. Nor is it one again of small and great ability, or of little and much knowledge: the word *wise* here is not used in its intellectual but in its practical sense, meaning provident or prudent. Some of them were improvident, some were provident. So that we are not justified in adopting the idea countenanced by the common representation in painting, which shows

the wise as carefully and decorously arrayed, with vigilance in their posture and glance, and the foolish as in loose and careless array, indicating worldliness and love of pleasure. These considerations are of great importance, as on their being attended to depends our intelligent appreciation of the parable. It is want of prudence, not want of heart or affection, which makes this distinction. And let me, before going further, add one general remark.

How often do we find this same distinction existing between persons equally good and equally earnest in common life! Take the management of an household—take the bringing up of children—do we not often see the very excellent of the earth making shipwreck of the things and persons they love best, and spend and are spent for, just because they

lack prudence? How many clever minds there are, how many loving hearts, into which common sense never seems to enter! And remember that each one of us Christians, members of Christ's Church, is not two persons, but one person. The world of our spirit is not a separate thing from the world of our mind and of our ordinary practice. Our religious characters are but reflections of our natural characters. So that in the Church likewise it is easy to imagine, indeed impossible not to see every day, that this same difference is found.

But one word as to the numbers thus distinguished. *Five* were foolish—*five* were wise. When our Lord was questioned as to the number that should be saved, He put aside the inquiry with a very plainly hinted rebuke. And here too we must not imagine Him giv-

ing us any insight, by this statement of equal numbers, into the inscrutable decrees of the great Judge; nay, rather does He, by the very equality of the numbers, discourage any speculative tendency that way. The most obvious division is that adopted by Him: the one about which there is the least reason to ask any further questions. If it leaves any impression on the mind, it is this, that it is an even chance, as we say, which line we ourselves take; that at every turn we have a temptation, as strong as our sense of right and prudence, to lead us astray: that we can therefore never afford to slacken our watch, nor to relax our attention.

But next, in what was this folly shown? Wherein did the imprudent differ from the prudent? "*For*," we read (I am again quoting the most ancient text), "*the foolish, when*

they took their lamps, took with them (*i.e.* with *themselves*—that is the word in the original) *no oil: but the prudent took oil in their* (or, *the*) *vessels with their lamps.*"

This then was that wherein the prudence and the imprudence were shown. All took their lamps—all went forth into the night with their lamps burning. Up to this time there was no visible difference. The difference was unseen, or if any was seen it was to the advantage of the imprudent. Perhaps they were not troubled with these oil vessels, or their vessels were not weighted with oil—they were lighter and more fit to move, and less encumbered for their watch.

But note, I pray you, the real difference between them: and in noting that difference most of the rest of our time will be spent. Wherein consisted the folly of the foolish?

Wherein the wisdom of the wise? In this. The former had forgotten that their lamps might need replenishing. They were burning brightly when they went forth; doubtless they would continue thus to burn. I do not mean to say that they reasoned thus: the mischief was that they did not reason at all. Prosperity in the present was with them security for the future.

But what did the others? As we saw before, it was not so much that they were abler, of a higher order, more pious, more faithful; but they were more *thoughtful.* They *took oil in their vessels with their lamps.* Who knows, they said within themselves, what may occur before the bridegroom comes?

We said before that these lamps answer very exactly in the interpretation to the souls of men, for which the unbelieving and unfaith-

ful who possess them care not, but which those who come out from the world and wait for Christ have to take in hand and care for. And now we may say, that this flame burning within them, and to be kept alive to the coming of the Bridegroom, is the light of Divine grace in the soul, kindled by the Spirit of the Lord: that light by which the Christian man walks and lives, and the quenching of which is the extinction of his spiritual life.

Now then what is the distinction, in the interpretation of the parable? Is it not this? That whereas this flame of the Divine life within needs continual feeding and ministering to, this is just that for which the foolish make no provision—imagining that the flame, once lighted, will burn on for ever; or fancying that a Christian education, or a knowledge of Divine truth, will suffice, without diligence

given to minister nourishment to the spiritual life. Whereas the prudent, the wise, take oil in their vessels with their lamps; are ever anxious to feed and provide for the light within by all available means; look to the future, and not only to the past and the present.

Let us observe the difference a little more familiarly and closely. The feeding oil, in our case, may be explained as being all that large provision of means and appliances of grace by which we are surrounded and invited. Now how do we stand, my friends, with regard to these? If we are in any sense members of Christ's Church, our spiritual life needs all the sustaining we can give it. It does not come naturally to us. To take our lamps and go forth to watch for the Bridegroom, this is not our matter-of-course way of proceeding. Say we have been baptized, say we have

been confirmed. Look at the words which were then used, and you will find mention of conflict and diligent endeavour; you will hear of praying that the rest of life may be led according to this beginning, of being strengthened with the Holy Ghost the Comforter, and daily increasing in the manifold gifts of grace. All this does not look as if it could be without effort. Now how many of you here present *are* leading your lives according to that beginning? How many *are* daily increasing in the gifts of grace?

Let us take some of these rich provisions of the oil of grace, and make them subjects of inquiry.

First, there is the great fountain of prayer, out of which flows daily oil for the light burning in the soul. Are there any among you foolish, and neglecting this chief source of sup-

ply? Now mind, I do not care a straw about any speculations concerning prayer, as to how it works, or whether we can give an account of what we mean by the answer to it. We do not understand enough of the mysterious ways of God to enable us to furnish a solution to such questions. We cannot say what considerations may enter the counsel of the Almighty will, by which all things are ordered. All we know of prayer is, that it *is* answered: sometimes according to its actual tenor, oftener otherwise than according to its actual tenor, but always to the advantage of him that prays. We know that the habit of prayer brings an amazing and never-failing supply of Divine influence to keep up the spiritual life within a man; and that without it the spiritual life languishes and dies.

Now let me ask those who hear me, Is there

any here who has taken his lamp and gone out to meet Christ,—in other words, who is a member of Christ's Church in anything like earnestness and honesty of purpose, and who yet is not in the habit of praying? And mind, I don't say is not in the habit of coming here—for here he is now: but who is not in the habit of praying? You know you may say morning and evening prayer, and may have said them for years, and may yet in all that time never once have really prayed. By saying, "Is not in the habit of praying," I mean is not accustomed to converse in heart and thought with God—for this alone is prayer. If there be such here, then have we an example of the foolish ones, who took no oil with them.

Again, God has provided for us, in the Old and New Testaments, abundant material for

knowing Him as only we can know Him, viz., as He has revealed Himself. Am I speaking to members of Christ who do not know, and do not study, do not care about, their Bibles? who let them lie unopened at home, and when they are read in church listen not with the heart, nay, perhaps not even with the outward ear? Then have we another example of taking no oil in the lamp.

And so I might go on through all those which are commonly known as means of grace. But leaving the others, I will mention but one more, and that one because of the very words in which we explain the benefit which we receive by it to be the strengthening and refreshing of our souls. Am I speaking to any who have taken the lamp and come forth to meet the Lord, and yet neglect the Holy Communion? Then have we here an example of

persons in this great matter foolish and improvident indeed. For there is no occasion of supplying the oil to the lamp of the inward life which in effectual working can compare to this one. In it we draw nearer to the realizing sense of Christ's work for us, than in any other ordinance; and it is above all things that realizing sense of His work and presence which keeps alive the holy purposes, the warm affections, of the spiritual life within us. And mind, I say this in no sense that any Christian here present need question or differ from. I assert the paramount importance of this Holy Sacrament, at the same time repudiating as false and unchristian all the superstitions which have gathered round it elsewhere, and which, shame to the dishonesty of some among ourselves, are gathering round it even in this reformed Church. Take them

all away, as they are most carefully taken away by choice of the most effectual words for the purpose in our Communion Office, and I maintain that notwithstanding the absence of them all, nay, because of the absence of them all, this holy ordinance must by every faithful Christian man and woman be regarded as the one chief occasion when he realizes the presence of his Divine Lord, and feeds upon Him. And if any thinks that he can be waiting for his Lord to come, if any thinks that he can be a Christian or have any part in Christ while he is knowingly neglecting and keeping away from this, the chief of the means of grace, then we have an example of one to whom the comparison of these foolish virgins fits the very closest of all.

But I must not stop here, nor mention as supplies of oil for the spiritual lamp the open

and recognised means of grace alone. Day by day, hour by hour, the Holy Spirit is waiting to feed the flame within the members of Christ. Not one day in the week alone, not in one building in a parish alone, not by one book alone, not by the voice of a man in a pulpit alone, but by a thousand springs bursting up and flowing over our common life, is He ready to supply our vessels with the holy oil of His grace. And the difference again between foolish Christians and wise Christians is plain and palpable here. Doubtless in the streets through which the bridesmaids went there were places where they might have turned in to those that sold, and have bought a supply of the oil which they had missed taking at first; but they had no mind for such an act of care: it never occurred to them; or, if it did, they put the

thought by, and performed it not. And even so it is in common life. There are those who, from every day's events, from God's ordinary mercies and judgments, are ever gathering nourishment for the life within, strengthening holy purposes, combating sinful propensities, seeing Him whom to know is life eternal: and there are those, again, who gather no food at all for their life of good from such things; who heed them no more than the beast of the field heeds the landscape. Nay, the difference is seen not only in ordinary life, but in those portions also of our lives which are most calculated to make an impression on men. Set one man down to a trouble or an illness, and though the flame of good purpose and holy life may have been flickering before, he will come out with it burning brightly and steadily—the vessel full

of oil, the lamp trimmed; but carry another man through the same, and he shall come out no way affected except with a sort of thankfulness which is more than half selfish, with resolutions unstrengthened, tempers unsubdued, the inner life shaken by the wind of the tempest without being refreshed by its rain.

So that all life through, not only in reference to great ordinances or important occasions, we have this difference between Christians. There are evermore, and everywhere, the foolish and the wise; the improvident and the prudent: and, even irrespective of the immense results which we are to see follow from the difference, even at this stage of our consideration of the parable, when we have not yet taken them into account, there is no difficulty surely in seeing how unworthy

the imprudence is of our heavenly calling, how absolutely and always demanded by it is the wise and prudent provision.

Are you, my brother, my sister, awakened to the awful import of your place as a member of Christ's Church? Have you taken your lamp, become aware of the worth of the soul for which Christ died, and have you gone forth, with Him for your Master, and His coming for your hope? in other words, are you, as you sit and listen here, honest or dishonest, a disciple or an hypocrite? If the former and better of these, then trust not to the past,—what you have been taught, what you have gone through in mind or experience: trust not to the present,—to your sense of connection with Christ, your resolves of obedience to Him, your longings for union with Him; all these may flicker, may grow

dim, may even go out altogether: but, I beseech you, have this to trust to; that your fresh springs are in Him; that you have oil in your vessel with your lamp: and that that blessed supply is not held in a broken cistern of your own hewing, not dependent on your own sense of it, or your own state of mind or spirits; but is drawn direct day by day from the living Fountain itself, accessible to all that seek it and at every time.

III.

"While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh: go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you; but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves."—MATT. xxv. 5—9.

THE ten virgins have come forth, each with her own lamp lit, and burning, to meet the bridegroom. So far we have accompanied them, and so far they are all alike. But last Sunday's meditation informed us somewhat more about them. Of these ten, each, we presume, fair and fairly arrayed, each seen by the equally bright light of her own lamp in her hand, we know that five have brought with them material wherewith to feed their lamps, while the other five have made no such provision. And in the inner meaning of the parable, this. We look over

this or any congregation. We see, or believe we see, a number of Christians who have in their rules of life and belief come forth from the world to prepare for the great meeting with the Husband of their souls. Those souls they have taken in hand, and have received in them the burning and warming and guiding light of God's Spirit. And here they stand, waiting for His coming: waiting for it, whether it arrive to them in its great general world-wide sense, as summoning them to meet Him in the air, or in its private individual sense, as calling them out of this present state to Him. Now of these Christians we know, by the revelation of such a parable as this, that some have been wise, and are storing up and taking with them that grace whereby the light of the Spirit may be fed and maintained; and that others, perhaps

quite as many, have taken no such care, and are making no such provision. The one set value by and store up the means of grace, the other despise and neglect them.

Now let us go on with the parable. They went out to meet the bridegroom, but he did not immediately appear. He tarried, delayed his coming. This is one of the frequent hints which our Lord gave of a considerable period to intervene before His second advent. You may notice that He, though He has told us that the day and hour were hidden from all, even in some mysterious manner from the Son Himself, yet ever speaks with more precision on this point than do His apostles, from whom it was in the ordinary sense of the word kept secret.

Well, the bridegroom tarried. And what did these ten meanwhile? They all slum-

bered (literally, nodded) and slept. What do these words imply? It has not been quite agreed among expositors. Are they to be understood as conveying blame, or as expressing a matter of course? On the one hand, why should the circumstance have been introduced at all, unless some instruction were to be derived from it? On the other hand, for persons gone forth and waiting in the night, what more natural than that drowsiness and sleep should come on? I believe we may easily find a solution in these words, "what more natural?" It is that very circumstance that is brought before us for our instruction. That it is so, shows us the imperfection of our nature; shows us our inability to fulfil the strict requirements of Christian watchfulness. Observe, ALL were thus affected: not the improvident and careless only, but the

wise and prudent also. And even so it is with us. We all, of all characters and temperaments, are lax and remiss and careless, as compared with any even moderate standard of vigilance during the Bridegroom's delay. So there is necessarily a general blame of human infirmity conveyed in these words. At the same time, there is also a measure of consolation in them. "He knoweth whereof we are made: He remembereth that we are but dust." All allowance is given, by the just Judge, by the sympathising Saviour, for our infirmities. And therefore we must not be too much discouraged at finding ourselves overcome by the weakness of our nature; nor again, may we be, either as ministers or as private Christians, more exacting from others than He is, to whom they will have to give account.

But there is yet another view of the words.

They are true of the whole Church, as well as of individual members of it. "When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" Then let no Church arrogate to herself perfect faithfulness, unwearied vigilance, infallible judgment; "they all slumbered and slept." Surely it can be naught but an idle dream, or worse, which we have been reading during this past week: a chief bishop with his under-shepherds gathered about him, standing in the temple of God, and likening himself to the Son of God, and claiming for his Church and office evermore to have been kept from error and unfaithfulness. While the Bridegroom tarries, they *all* slumber and sleep. The attitude of every Church on earth ought then to be humility, ought to be self-distrust, ought to be an abstinence from self-laudation and lofty claims. Nor ought

this lesson to be wholly lost upon ourselves. We too show oftentimes a reluctance to acknowledge the shortcomings of our own branch of the Church universal. We are given to pointing out how aptly this or that is arranged in her services, how beautiful and expressive is this or that prayer, how perfect are her creeds, or how blameless her articles. But she too, among them all, has slumbered and slept: has missed her point, or overshot it, as often as others; has refused to sweep away what was worn out and hindered her work, and has risen in anger against proposals shaped for the needs of the time, being bound with the leaden chain of precedent. And therefore millions have drifted away whom she has been too proud to pursue; and she, dowered as never Church was before for Christ's work in the world, lags after her missionary

duties, and lets their performance become the scorn of unbelievers. Other Churches may, in their corruption, have been more active for mischief; but surely none like her in her purity have been so powerless for good. Compared to the keen and sleepless eyes of the unsinning ones who watch for the signal in heaven, what is the most ardent hope, what the most fervent prayer of the saints on earth, but a slumbering and sleeping?

"At midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh: go ye out to meet him." We often hear of the sudden inbreaking of a thief in the night as a symbol of this unexpected coming. He came just when he was least looked for—when sleep was at the deepest. And even thus is it with regard to Christ's coming to the individual. That advent is something so unexpected, although

long expected, that even to the most watchful it is an awaking to a strange fact and a sudden presence. A man may be sick for years, and yet the hour when first he knows he has to die is a surprise to him; a passing abruptly into a new sense of an awful reality. Yes, brethren, however watchful you or I may strive to be, and to think ourselves, the cry, "He is at hand, go and meet Him," will be to us like waking from a dream with a sudden shout. At midnight will the cry be made to each of us. And is not the same true of the whole Church? Long centuries has she been waiting for her Lord; and yet her waiting, as we saw, is all like a slumber, and the note of His coming will be to her, whenever and however it comes, like this midnight cry. Imagine for a moment the contrast between the state of mind and oc-

cupation of the Church at any given time, and that which would succeed if the Lord came upon her, and we need not any more convincing of the justice of this similitude.

A voice then cried; but what did it cry? "Behold, the bridegroom!" the word "cometh" is not in our most ancient copies: "Behold, the bridegroom!" He was close, he was in sight, where that cry came from. My friends, what words are these! To the whole Church, which long ages has waited for Him; to each member of the Church who has come out from the world to expect Him, over whom one decade and another decade of years has passed, with no tidings of Him. At last He, in whom we have with difficulty believed; He, about whom we have speculated and questioned; He, who has been to us, at the very best, One read about, One rea-

lized in loving imagination and trust; He is come, and calleth for us. The Bridegroom —One who shall complete us, shall fill up our miserable half-lives with the fulness of His eternal perfection, shall fold us close to Himself for ever and for ever!

And the other words of the cry are not to be passed over: "Go ye forth to meet him." But had not they gone forth already? My friends, in this matter there is a going forth, and there is another going forth. Of the first we have already spoken: that heart and life separation from that which is selfish and unloving and ungodly, which all put upon them when they take their souls in hand to wait for the Bridegroom. But when the cry is made that He is in sight, oh then there must be another and a different going forth. Not the world only and the world's maxims and

creed must be left behind in heart; but all this place that God has given each of us to fill, the home that has been so long over us, and the books that we loved, and the voices whose sound refreshed us, yea, and the weeping faces round the bed,—these all must be cast off like the garment when they said, "Arise, He calleth thee." Yes, and yet more: this closest and most familiar home of all, the lifelong investiture of the personality of each of us, even this body, must be laid aside, and we must go forth, beings unknown, on a path unknown, to meet Him—to stand, spirit to spirit, close up to Him who died for us and reigns over us, who claims us, and shall judge us, the Bridegroom of our souls. This is that last going forth, that exodus from our house of bondage, that midnight departure much to be remembered through the ages of eternity.

Well, the cry sounded round them, and they spring up from their slumber. "Then all those virgins arose;" there was not one whom the cry had not awakened. This belongs mainly to the great general application of the parable: as the flash which shineth from the one end of the heaven to the other end of the heaven, so shall the coming of the Son of man be. Every one shall hear, every one shall see,—as plainly as if the trumpet blew and the cross in the heavens blazed out for him or her alone. "They all arose, and trimmed"—or rather "cleared up," adorned, it is literally—"their own lamps." The common house lamp even now used in the south of Europe and the East is apt to become club-wicked if left to burn long, and has a small needle hanging to it with which to clear it out. This it was which they did; not the

trimming, as we commonly understand it, which would necessitate putting out the lamps and cutting the wick.

And what shall we say that this arising, this purging the wick, imports? I am surely speaking to some who know well. At the first overwhelming sense of danger, at the first irresistible consciousness of God's presence being near us, or after the moment when a soul that was in contact with our own has passed into the other world, what is the process which the mind rapidly, half unconsciously goes through, but this, the clearing of the lamp, the purifying the flame? That favourite scheme of yesterday, that ardent earthly desire that hung like a fungus on the wick, troubling the spiritual life,—how they are severed and drop off at such a time!

And then, and not till then, appeared a

difference. But not at the first moment. All the flames had been dull; none sprung up into brightness with the first clearing out: but after that came the difference. Five were in a moment burning steadily and clearly; five were flickering down, showing the red wick and the scanty tongue of flame. Why? Five had been fed; but the other five there was nothing to feed. The foolish said unto the wise, "Give us of your oil: for our lamps are going out." Not "are gone out." The verb is in the present tense, and ought to have been so rendered. The lamps were not extinguished; the flame had not died; the pouring in of a little oil might repair the mischief: they did not want relighting, but only feeding.

Let us pause a little for the interpretation. The cry is heard at midnight—the sudden

notice—say, by two among us. Each one springs up awakened, each one clears out the flame within. Alas! it is but faint and feeble at the best, and the Bridegroom is very near. All that ought to be bright is dull; all that ought to be firm and strong is fainting and fluttering. And then the wise one turns the oil vessel and feeds the flame. The knees are bent, the hands are clasped; the desires of the heart rise to the foot of the throne: or the holy Book is taken down; it is as a fair pasture land where every footpath is known, and the weary soul goes straight to the wells of salvation, and draws: or the blessed table of the Lord is spread, and the fainting one is strengthened and refreshed by His body and blood. All these ways are accustomed and familiar to the wise one, who has carried the oil in the vessel with her lamp.

But how shall the other fare, for whom the throne of grace has long had no charms, who has lost the power to pray, and the very language itself of prayer? to whom the Bible is a land unknown—a treasure-house doubtless for the need, if but only the treasure could be found? that foolish one, who has heard the call to the Lord's table so long unmoved, that the banquet has no sweetness? The lamp is going out. What minister of Christ has not stood over beds where all this has its example? What one has not witnessed the departure of souls with "Oh if I had but" on the lips?

But what is the request that accompanies the sad discovery? The foolish said to the wise, "Give us of your oil: for our lamps are going out." Alas, the wish is vain! For "no man may redeem his brother, nor make agree-

ment unto God for him." Now we see the fitness of that emphatic little word, their *own* lamps, twice repeated: not another's lamp, not another's flame, not a flame fed with another's oil. God is jealous of His part in us; He alone will live in, will minister grace to, our souls. No merit but His shall clear us; no Spirit but His shall guide us; no fatherhood but His shall perfect our adoption. There lives not a being who is dependent on another being for the life eternal; no angel, no saint, no priest, can give us of his oil; if there be no oil in our own vessels, our lamps must go out.

The answer of the wise ones in the parable has, some have thought, no exact counterpart in the interpretation: "But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell,

and buy for yourselves." And yet I should be loth to imagine that any such words as these of our Lord's in His parables were ever thought and uttered by Him in vain. "The righteous are scarcely saved." No wise soul, no holy saint, has anything to spare of that wherewith he is to stand before God. None of us appropriates by faith and love more of Divine grace than is enough for him or for her. This is surely one lesson to be learnt from the reply. And there is yet another and another. As for example, this: "Rather go ye to them that sell." Then there are those who, of course from no exuberance of their own, but by regular appointment from Christ, are in some sense the treasurers of His stores, and dispensers of this oil of grace to feed the spiritual lamp,—ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. To the Church, and

her ordinances and her ministrations, this is the direction, and not to their fellows, in which these of the defective inward life are referred, for its renewal and sustenance. And as yet another matter to be learned from this reply note this—"Buy for yourselves." In one sense, the wine and milk, if we will, the oil, of the gospel is furnished without money and without price. God requires no costly, no unnatural sacrifices; the unsearchable riches are as much within the power of the poorest as of the wealthiest. But in another sense every drop of that oil a man must buy for himself. Nothing, and of all things no spiritual gift, without labour. Earnestness, diligence, perseverance, self-denial,—these are the coins which we must pay for the flame-renewing oil.

The covenant in which we find ourselves

with God has two sides, like every other covenant. He on His part will most surely keep and perform His side of the promise; He is pledged to do us good, to renew us unto life by His Holy Spirit, to give us pardon and life everlasting; but we must also faithfully promise for our parts to seek unto Him and be faithful unto Him. All the grace we seek for He is pledged to give us: but not grace unsought: "Go ye to them that sell, and buy for yourselves."

And so they part: the prudent, to meet the bridegroom, even now close upon them; the improvident, to do at last, in the hurry and uncertainty of the moment, what ought to have been done long before; what their own lightness, and carelessness, and feeling of security, stood in the way of their caring for at the outset. What success attended

their tardy endeavours to repair the error, we shall see hereafter.

Meanwhile we have here represented to us what often takes place in the experience of life: the earnest and agonized attempt to make up for lost time and opportunities which follows on spiritual alarm: the eager resolves on beds of dangerous sickness, the softening of the hard worldly heart under bitter bereavement, the melting away of the compacted fabric of unbelief before the approaching fire of God's presence. In our portion of to-day nothing is said as to whether this late-taken care was of any avail. For aught we know as yet, they may have found them that sold; the supply may have been quick, the result happy, and they may have rejoined their prudent sisters, and taken their places in the procession before the

arrival of the bridegroom. Let those who trust to such good fortune (and they may be numbered by thousands everywhere), let them come again, and hear what followed in the parable.

IV.

"And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, And they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterwards came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore: for ye know neither the day nor the hour."—MATT. XXV. 10—13.

WE left the band of virgins divided: the wise had supplied their lamps with oil, and were gone to meet the bridegroom, now announced as at hand: the improvident had gone to buy oil to keep their lamps from going out. And therein we saw the portraiture of two classes of Christians in the Church: the one class, those who are ever anxious to gain more of God's grace and Divine help, and to keep their souls ready for the summons of His presence; the other, those who imagine that the religious life, once begun, is safe; that because they are called and presumed to be Christians, and

have at some time felt the flame of love and zeal within them, all will be well. Then upon both of these comes the call, unexpectedly, that God is near. The one class are ready; or, if they are sensible of being unready and slumbering, and the flame in their hearts burns low, yet the supply is within their grasp, and they can apply to it and refresh the flame. The other, taken by surprise and terrified, praying for help where help is none, are referred to those that sell: to the ordinary ministers of God and means of grace. But the great question is, Is there time? Can the process of buying for themselves be gone through in a moment? Will not the Bridegroom have arrived before they return? Will the fainting soul, out of the habit of prayer, ignorant of Scripture, unused to feed on Christ in His Supper, be able to

recover the lamp before it is summoned away?

I need not tell you that this is a most painful question. I have walked away before now from death-beds, and the inquiry has pursued me home, Would those words, those prayers, that Holy Communion,—all the work of a first compunction after years of carelessness, could they, in this short twilight hour of life, have fitted the soul for the heavenly Bridegroom? And if they have, why should we take the trouble to live holy, careful lives? Why should we deny ourselves, and make lifelong search after Christ, if He can be found in these few useless minutes at the end? Ah, brethren, such questions are too hard for us. God knows each individual case: ours be it to judge no uncharitable judgments, but rather to hope even against

hope; to speak in Christian language of the departed, even where man judges otherwise. For it is better thus—better for ourselves, and better for the great cause of charity, which is the one most excellent way, and which is to cover, not to judge, the multitude of sins.

But meantime, while we in our weakness speak and think thus, let us listen to the voice of the parable.

"While they went to buy, the bridegroom came." There are moments that are worth more than years. We cannot help it: there is no proportion between spaces of time in importance nor in value. A sick man may have the unwearied attendance of his physician for weeks—and then may perish in a minute because he is not by. A stray unthought-of five minutes may contain the

event of a life. And this all-important moment, this moment disproportionate to all other moments, who can tell when it will be upon us? What a lesson to have our resources for meeting it available and at hand! This in the parable was a moment of that kind: one to which all these ten had long looked forward: it came—but it came to these foolish ones just when they were away and had no part in it. They might have gone and bought oil twenty times over while the bridegroom tarried, and they slumbered and slept: but they just went now, and lost him for ever.

"While they went to buy, the bridegroom came." To what does this point, to what can it point, in the interpretation, but to the fact that there is a time too late to seek what all must find before they can see God? that

there are those who hear the midnight cry, who fall prostrate in their souls before God, and wrestle for grace; but before that grace has fed the lamp, the hour is come?

And note what follows. "They that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast: and the door was shut." What can be more hopeless than the condition in which the others find themselves on their return? But they are represented in the parable as making at all events the attempt to enter. They stand in the night, in the darkness outside, of which the Lord often speaks elsewhere: they come and knock, and say, "Lord, Lord, open to us." But they have, by their absence at the one decisive moment, forfeited their place among the rank of the bridesmaids: "He answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not." You have

no place here. Whatever you may have once been called to, your names have dropped out of the reckoning for this feast, and I have no knowledge of you. And here the tale concludes. Here the inquirer is baffled, and the sad mist drops down over the end. And so it ever is in Holy Scripture. It may be said, we know but very little of the bliss hereafter: but we know still less of the woe. And as eye never saw, ear never heard, and the heart of man never conceived the one, so it is equally vain for us to attempt to penetrate the dark mysteries of the other. Rash words are continually being uttered, and minute details are given, where God's Spirit has seen fit to be silent, and in doing so has taught us to be silent also. Even what is revealed is given to us in an earthen vessel, and breaks the vessel in the giving.

Human language is taxed to the uttermost for figures to convey any idea of these things to us, and it fails. And, my brethren, it is well it should be so. We Christians are called, not to perdition, but to salvation: we ministers are sent, not to preach hell, but to preach Christ; to proclaim, not the gospel of denunciation, but the gospel of love.

And it often seems to me that more effect for warning, more for converting sinners would be produced by us, if we simply took this matter as it is uttered in passages of Holy Writ, as each comes before us, and abstained from intensifying and adding horror on each occasion. Let us try to do this now. Look at what is here represented to us. This coming of the Bridegroom is the most joyous day for heaven and earth, the most joyous for the Church, the most joyous for

every faithful soul. All nature has been earnestly expecting it; for then first shall the wilderness rejoice and blossom as the rose; then none shall hurt or destroy, but the redeemed of the Lord shall come with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. The whole Church from the first ages has been looking for it as the end of conflict and the beginning of everlasting rest; every faithful soul has yearned for it as revealing the full estate of bliss which the Saviour purchased with His blood. It is the birthday of the sons of God—the first full and blessed manifestation of their perfected life.

Now set against this—"The door was shut." The improvident ones had no part in all this joy. And this cannot be all. Where shall the soul be that is shut out from Him whose

presence, the revelation of whom in all His beauty and glory, is the highest enjoyment of the soul? Do not some of us know on earth what it is to have missed some great advantage, which has hopelessly gone by: and if the loss has been occasioned by some paltry trifling omission, some negligence as to time, or as to mere form, how far more biting is the pang which seizes us as often as we think over our irreparable loss and our utter folly? And if this be so with some earthly loss, which may after all turn out to have been a gain, oh what will it be when all is lost —all we were made for—all we have thought for—spoken for—lived for!

Look at it again in this way. When earthly remorse overtakes us, see what manner of men we are:—selfish men, vain men, self-deceiving men. The bitterest pang is eased

by a hundred excuses; the dull blinding mist of disappointment is lighted up by a hundred tapers of self-esteem, and the weight of the irrevocable past is lightened for us by the necessity of keeping up good appearances before men. And then if all else fail, there is Time, which rounds off all piercing edges, and decorates every ruin with flowers; and last of all, there is hope, which, in spite of every resolve not to hope, springs up all around, and summons us to action. But what will it be when every one of these alleviations is swept away—when all is valued at its true price, self is seen through, human opinion is a dream fled for ever, hope has ceased to be, and the future is a mere reflection of the past?

And what a lurid light is thrown back on that past by the answer of the Bridegroom from within! What words are these, "I know

you not"! To have been baptized into Christ—to have followed Christ—to have perhaps preached Christ—and then after all to be repudiated by Him—disowned—disclaimed as friends. O my brethren, what scenes there will be in that day of His coming, when many, whom men have thought peculiarly His, shall turn out never to have belonged to Him at all! What a terrible thing it is which happens every now and then, when a man of decent life, religious profession perhaps, some day turns out to have been cherishing in his bosom some foul sin—sinks away out of sight, and is quoted as a terror! but what shall this be to those disclosures which shall then flash on the astonished world? Many that were first shall be last. He whose lamp once burned so brightly that all men held him for a saint,—he became

careless, and let the holy words pass over his ears, and took no note of them, and so there was no oil, and he was shut out. That preacher, whose eloquent words poured out persuasion, whose whole tone was that of one who lived in God's presence,—alas, he watered others without refreshing himself: he believed not his own facts, and his inward thoughts had an answer for his own arguments: look not for him at the marriage supper of the Lamb; there was no oil to feed the flame of spiritual life in him, the lamp went out, and the door was shut against him.

We pursue the excluded—we can pursue them—no further. As we said before, we speak not to-day of the peculiar prophetic place of the parable in its first and especial meaning. We are now on its general application: to the whole Church—to every Chris-

tian soul. So we will turn, in concluding, to the Lord's final words.

"Watch therefore: for ye know not the day, nor yet the hour." So the verse stands in all ancient copies and versions without exception. The words "when the Son of man cometh" have been inserted by the moderns to make the saying uniform with others where this ending occurs.

"Watch therefore." Let us take the connection, the inference, first: and then the nature of the duty forced on us by it. "Therefore." Why? The Lord Himself gives the reason. We are to watch, because we know not the day nor yet the hour. If it were revealed to us from heaven that on a certain day the Bridegroom of our souls would be upon us, we might think that we should be certain of being ready for Him. But even then it

might not be so. Of the appointed day we should not know the hour, and thus should perhaps miss His actual arrival: and even of the hour, if that were revealed, we might miss the minute. We know absolutely nothing of His times and counsels. We nourish plans for next week, next month: it is natural to us so to do, and we cannot avoid it: but before the time for the nearest of those plans arrives, the dust may have been sprinkled over us, and our names may have dropped away from the lips of men. It is not safe to trust to having any, even the least amount of time for going to them that sell, and buying to brighten the lamp at the last. Who has not heard of the sudden heavy fall—who has not heard of friends breaking in at the morning hour, and finding the spirit gone? Who has not heard of the crash, and the devouring

flame, and the crushed remains, or the unrecognised ashes?

"Therefore"—says the Lord of our spirits and the Lord of love; He who made us, and cares for us, and died for us, and shall judge us—therefore, because this is so, "watch."

And what is meant by "watch"? These words of His, which are to last when heaven and earth have passed away, have a thousand shifting hues as they run their eternal course, reflecting each age of the world, and its ways, and its weaknesses, and its duties. And so this command to watch has put on different meanings at different times. In days when war and fierce passions were the world's employ, they carried to Christian ears a command to camp out in the wilderness, and abandon social life and human comforts. And it may be that in those times there was

a certain truth in the sound. We at all events have reaped the benefits of those desert vigils in treasures of Divine wisdom and examples of lofty self-abandonment. But it is to another kind of watchfulness that our Master summons us of this age. Our regular lives of peaceful employment and social duty call for no such violent remedies; and if such are applied, they furnish examples either of ridiculous affectation, or of revolting duplicity.

Let us examine this command to watch with reference to our own days. And in doing so we need not at all cast off the idea of religious exercise and devotion. What has been already said on the parable will, I trust, prevent our doing so, and will keep the diligent, earnest use of the means of grace, public, family, and private, for our time as for all time, one chief ingredient in this enjoined watchfulness.

Still, when this is laid down, we must not be unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. God's good providence orders the times that pass over us, each age as it comes, for us to understand and use, not to rail at and find fault with. One would suppose from the talk and practice of many good men, that the first duty of life was to be discontented with the times in which God has placed us. Such conduct seems, by whatever assumption of superior wisdom of the past it may come recommended, to be rather that of the foolish virgins than that of the wise. If the lamp is to burn, it must be with fresh oil of the present, and in the atmosphere, however compounded, which now surrounds us.

In order then for any effectual watch of God being kept, we must study, and we must be acquainted with the especial characteristics

and duties of our own times, and in and by them, and not by those of another age, must we prepare for His coming, both to the Church and to ourselves.

Now what will this import, as applied to us of the present day? What has been God's dealing with us of to-day in the matter of religion and of the waiting for His coming? Let us look at it sensibly, and fairly. What do we see in this Christian country? Is not this the prominent feature of our Christianity, that any dream of entire unity of belief has been by God's providence utterly broken down; that the differences of Christian bodies and churches are multiplied and still widening; that the vision of uniformity in things outward which our fathers entertained has for ever vanished; and yet that amidst all this variety the great first principles of Christianity are

actuating men, and are dwelling in national consciences, though inconsiderably compared with what ought to be, yet to an extent hitherto altogether unknown? It was remarked only a short time ago by a shrewd worldly observer of men and things, as the great wonder of the last few years, that movements are now taking place, and changes are avowedly based, directly on first principles; that we hear daily less and less of expediency and of petty caution, and more and more of great, deep, abiding, unmistakable rules and motives. If it be so, let us thank God for it—but let us see His hand, and obey Him likewise.

Does not such a consideration lead us to conclude that the true watch of God in our times is rather to look to Christian conduct, than to any outward profession whatever? God has given us an immense advantage for

promoting in our days, and giving examples of, purity, charity, justice: but He has put us, and especially us of this country, under the greatest disadvantage for party conflicts, for proselytism to our own faith and worship, for putting down others who differ from us. Every attempt at such a course, within or without our own pale, only serves to render it more impossible for the future.

"Watch therefore." Seek, each one, every opportunity of nourishing the sacred flame by thoughts, by words, by acts, of purity, justice, charity. It is not by abundance of religious seasons and rites, it is not by rigid observance of religious seasons and rites, it is not by denouncing all who cannot utter our passwords, that we shall be preparing for the day and hour of which we know not: not by loud echoing of uttered beliefs, but by intensity

of inward faith; not by barring every door except that by which we ourselves entered, but by opening the gates that the righteous nations which loveth the truth may enter in: by being that which God, interpreted by His actual present dealings with us, would have us to be: by serving Him in our generation, and letting our light shine before the men of our generation. And thus may it be found, when the midnight cry is made, if at the best dim and flickering, yet close to the Fountain of light, and easily supplied; thus may it, after the night-watch is for ever done, pass with us into the heavenly banquet, and shine out as the sun in the kingdom of our Father.

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